



Go West  
Young  
Hearts

*A Love  
Worth*  
Trusting

JANELLE ADAMS

A Love Worth Trusting  
Go West Young Hearts Book 2

Janelle Adams



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She's traveling alone out West. He's a heartbroken blacksmith. As sparks fly between Sarah and Calvin, will they be able to put their pasts behind them and find true love?

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# Chapter 1

Ben Sterling rubbed his eyes as he reached the top of the hill, blinking twice. After two weeks without seeing another human being, there below him was a small town. A mining town, judging by the looks of things. There was one long street down the middle of the town, and a sprinkling of homes and other buildings spread out behind the main street. At the end of the street was an encampment of tents, sure to be full of weary prospectors in search of riches and fortune. On the other side of the encampment, a meandering river flowed.

Ben glanced behind him, as he did every few minutes, always afraid Walter and Moses would be there, guns drawn. No one was there. Ben let out a long whoosh of air. They hadn't found him, not yet anyway. He was tired of being on the run, tired of constantly checking to see if Walter and Moses were on his heels, but he didn't have much choice if he didn't want to be dead. It had been too close in the last town. Ben had barely escaped, with only enough time to grab his two bags and jump onto Bullet.

Someone must have ratted him out. That was the only explanation. Ben had stayed too long, gotten too comfortable, and trusted too much. Lesson learned. This time he'd stay in this town for a little while, do some work and make some money, and then he would be off. It was the only way to stay two steps ahead of Walter and Moses. They'd come close to finding him twice now, and Ben wasn't about to let that happen again.

Ben patted his horse on his head, rubbing the spot he loved behind his ears. Bullet, his one friend and loyal companion over the last three years. "You deserve a rest," Ben said. "We both do." He squeezed his legs, and Bullet started down the hill to the town below.

## Chapter 2

Lydia Cobble leaned forward and set down a plate of scrambled eggs and potatoes with her right hand, careful to not tip the other plates that were lined up her left arm.

“Mmm. Smells delicious,” the man—Sam, Lydia learned his name was—said.

“I hope you enjoy it.” Lydia set another plate down in front of the man next to Sam.

“I’m sure I will.” Sam stared at Lydia, his eyes boring into her. He grabbed Lydia’s hand. “But I’d enjoy it much more if you’d be my wife.”

Lydia yanked her hand back. “Hands to yourself, Sam. This isn’t a saloon.”

“Ohhh!” the men around the table said, laughing. They clinked their tin cups against the table.

“She told you, didn’t she Sam!” one of Sam’s friends said, slapping him on the back and nearly knocking Lydia over in the process. “She’d rather have me. Isn’t that right, pretty lady?”

Lydia forced her smile. She didn’t understand how her sister Betty had enjoyed this, had enjoyed the constant, shallow flirtations. Betty, the beauty of the family, had been the one to receive the majority of the attention. She had relished that attention, lived for it even, until finally someone had come along and actually captured her heart. Now that Betty was married, the men shifted their focus to Lydia.

And Lydia hated it.

The only reason any of them paid her any attention was because she was female. That was it. They didn’t care about her passions or her dreams or whether their souls had a deep connection. With so few women in Coyote Pass, and even fewer of them unmarried, they saw a woman as a commodity, much like the gold they prospected. They didn’t see women for who they truly were, the person inside. They didn’t take the time to get to know her, to know what she was like and what she dreamed. But Lydia understood that Cobble Cafe was a business, and she had to maintain a balance of keeping the



men happy and at bay at the same time.

Lydia entered the kitchen, rubbing her temples with her fingers. Even in her lightweight cotton dress, the warmth from the wood-burning stove caused drips of sweat to form on her brow. Father was at the stove, manning several skillets of scrambled eggs. The sizzle of the butter, the clink of the pans were such familiar sounds that Lydia almost didn't notice them anymore. Mother stood beside Father, adding fried potatoes and chopped fruit to the tin plates once the eggs were ready.

"What's the matter?" Mother asked.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing," Lydia said.

"Doesn't look like nothing to me."

"Those men," Lydia said.

"And what's wrong with them?" Father asked. Father picked up a skillet and poured the eggs onto the waiting plates.

Lydia sighed, chastising herself for saying anything. All it would do would open the door for yet another lecture from her parents on how she ought to settle down and get married. The lectures had increased tenfold since Betty had married. If Betty, the younger sister, had married, it was high time that Lydia pick one of the men and settle down herself, they said. They hated to see their daughter wasting away—already twenty-three and no prospects in sight.

"Those men are so hungry!" Lydia said. "I can't get the food out to them fast enough!"

Father eyed Lydia, as if he didn't quite believe her. But he said nothing further as she loaded up her arms for another round of food. *Whew*, Lydia thought, grateful to have avoided a lecture.

The morning flew by. More and more people had come to town over the last year, the majority of them men, and Cobble Cafe had gotten busier than ever. Some of the men had built themselves homes in the outskirts around Main Street, but most lived in tents, their simple meals cooked over campfires. They loved Cobble Cafe and the home-cooked meals, and the mornings were busy as different men whizzed in and out, filling up in preparation for a long day in the mines or river.

And though her body ached at the end of each day, her feet sore from marching from the kitchen to the dining hall and back, Lydia preferred the busyness of the mornings than the slowness of the midafternoon. There were always things to do, of course: dishes to wash, potatoes to scrub, veggies to chop, and serving the few

stragglers who came in for a midafternoon meal. But there was too much time left to think, too much time for her mind to wonder how different her life would have been if her father hadn't uprooted the family from their nice life in Philadelphia and brought them out to the nothingness of California.

And, of course, too much time to think about Andrew. Lydia thought about him less and less as the years went by, but he still popped into her mind, especially in the quiet moments of the day as she stood chopping carrots or sweeping up the crumbs in the dining hall. The son of her parents' closest friends in Philadelphia, Lydia had loved him—and thought that he had loved her as well. They'd grown up together, and Lydia had always imagined they would marry and share the rest of their lives happily ever after. But then her father had announced, out of the blue, that they were moving to California.

Panic had seized Lydia. She hadn't wanted to move to California, to leave everything and everyone she knew behind. But most of all, she hadn't wanted to leave Andrew. She had scribbled a note to him during church that they needed to talk, and after church they had taken a stroll down the busy streets. It was there that she had done something completely against her nature: she poured out her heart to him, of her angst in leaving Philadelphia. Of her angst to leave him.

Still, all those years later, Lydia's heart throbbed violently within her as she thought of that moment. That moment when Andrew had looked at her not with love but with pity. He'd said he was sorry to hear that, and that was it. There had been no marriage proposal, as Lydia had longed for, no plan to keep Lydia in town near him. That was the last time Lydia had seen Andrew. Oh she had written him, foolishly, his only response to ask her to stop, as he had married Estelle. Estelle Waterby, her closest girlfriend.

Lydia tossed a handful of chopped carrots into the bowl and grabbed a new carrot. It was useless to think about Andrew. The only thing it brought her was pain and heartache. But for some reason, Andrew seemed to be filling her thoughts more than usual on that day. Lydia chopped vigorously, her hand moving in rhythmic, almost melodious movements. Beside her, Betty hummed a merry tune. Lydia envied her, envied her happy-go-lucky nature, her contented life.

Lydia needed something else to think about. She remembered

Sarah, her closest friend, had told her she had a book she could borrow. With so few opportunities to acquire books in Coyote Pass, a new book to read was always something to be excited about. If she finished her chores quickly, she could stop by where Sarah worked and get the book.

And get Andrew off her mind.

## Chapter 3

After several weeks sleeping on the ground with dirt for a mattress and a rock for a pillow, Ben was excited for a few nights in a hotel. He'd had to flee the last town in such a rush that he hadn't even had time to gather his bedroll, and there had been more than a few nights he'd shivered in the cold, even in the late California spring. Ben guided Bullet toward the main street of the town, which wasn't much. The buildings were built from scraps of wood, some sturdier looking than others, with the occasional brick building thrown into the mix. Bottles lay around the saloons, and litter was everywhere. A breeze blew, the stink of the outhouses accosting his nose.

Ben traveled down the street, taking note of the establishments. There was a general store, of course, and a cafe. Saloons, a bank, a hotel called Canyon Lodge, which would be a possible place for him to stay. Ben passed by a barber shop, a grumpy gentleman sitting out front. Ben nodded hello; the man grunted in reply. Ben continued on. Up ahead was a blacksmith shop, smoke streaming out of the windows.

"Git out of the way!"

Ben turned at the sound, just in time to see an out-of-control horse and wagon come barreling down the street, its driver clinging to the reins. They passed only inches from Bullet, causing him to rear in fright. Bullet had never reared like that before, but Ben had been on plenty of horses who had, and his body instinctively jumped into action. He leaned forward in the saddle, tipping his upper body toward Bullet's neck, and loosened his grip on the reins. "Easy boy," Ben said. As Ben clung to Bullet, his eyes fell on a woman who wasn't paying any attention. Her head was downcast, examining a book.

"Watch out!" Ben shouted.

The woman's head shot up. Her eyes widened, and she scurried backward. As she did, her foot caught in a pothole, causing her to stumble to the ground.

Bullet came down with a thud. Ben jumped off him, checked to ensure he had calmed, then scurried over to the woman.

“Are you all right?” Ben asked.

The woman was standing by now, brushing dirt off her faded blue dress. Her cheeks were bright red, half hidden in the shadow of her bonnet. Thick lashes surrounded dark, almond-shaped eyes, and her lips appeared as if they were made from the nectar of the pinkest flower.

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” the woman said, maintaining her eyes downcast. Her arms worked in fast, frenzied movements as she swatted at her dress. “Well, completely embarrassed. But physically, I’m fine.”

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Ben said.

The woman glanced up, her eyes meeting Ben’s. Their intensity startled Ben, as if they guarded a deep, complicated soul, spellbinding him in an instant.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about?” The woman laughed, a nervous laugh, but there was a sweetness to it nonetheless. “I wasn’t paying attention, I nearly step under your horse, and I fall into this stupid pothole. Yep, you’re right. Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

This time it was Ben’s turn to laugh. He liked her spunkiness. It had been two weeks since he had seen another human being, let alone a woman, and he realized how much he missed it. Ben noticed her book on the ground, and he picked it up, brushing it off before he handed it to her.

“This must be an interesting book,” Ben said.

“Oh, I actually just got it from my friend,” the woman said. “Well, I have to get back to work. Sorry for almost stepping in front of your horse.” She turned to go.

“Wait!” Ben said, the words coming out before he had a chance to consider them. “Can I at least know your name?”

The woman stopped, turning back around. Ben studied her—her thin frame, her delicate hands, the softness of her cheekbones—committing her to memory. He shouldn’t, he told himself; he should let her go and forget the moment, just as he would any casual conversation with a stranger. But there was something about her that Ben knew wouldn’t be so easy to forget, something about her that Ben knew would linger with him long after she disappeared from view.

“Lydia,” the woman said.

“Lydia,” Ben repeated, the sound sweet on his tongue. “That’s

pretty.”

“Thank you,” the woman said, as if she was accustomed to men’s compliments. And why wouldn’t she be, especially in a town dominated by men?

“I’m Ben.”

“Nice to meet you, Ben. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Then Lydia hurried off, leaving Ben behind, gawking after her as she half ran down the street. When she was out of sight, Ben returned to Bullet and patted his nose. Bullet shook his head, his mane flopping as he did, as if to say, “Don’t get involved.”

“You’re right,” Ben said, hopping onto Bullet. “I shouldn’t get involved.”

## Chapter 4

Lydia scurried down the street, still burning from embarrassment. Not even the book in her hands made her feel better. What a dunce she had been, so clumsy. What was she thinking, stepping into the street without paying attention? And then to fall like that. Lydia slapped her face, squeezing her skin with her fingers. Her younger sister had gotten all of the grace, all of the fluidity of movement, as if she was a ballerina; none of that had been given to Lydia. It wasn't fair.

And to make matters worse, the man had been so butterfly-inducingly handsome. Lydia liked to consider herself someone not easily swooned by handsome men, certainly not the way her sister had been in her pre-marriage days, but Ben had made her heart stop. He was tall and lean, his neck showing off the muscles that surely shaped the rest of his body. His skin was tan and bronzed, as if kissed by the sun itself. His eyes, which gleamed as green as any polished emerald, gazed on her with such intensity that Lydia's knees wobbled and turned to goo. But the most memorable part of him had been his birthmark, located halfway between his ear and his chin, shaped like a lopsided heart, as if Cupid himself had left his branding.

There were handsome men in town. Calvin Cox, the blacksmith who went on to marry her best friend Sarah. Wesley Sutton, who had briefly tried to court Betty. Josiah Dillon, who worked across the street part-time in the general store. And yet none of them had ever made Lydia's knees buckle; none of them had ever made her act so nervous. Why, she practically ran away from Ben, like a silly schoolgirl scared of boys.

Well, what did it matter? She had never seen him before, and chances were she would never see him again. Lydia spent her days working in the cafe, and other than church or the occasional Sunday afternoon meal with Sarah and Calvin, Lydia didn't go out. She didn't dance at the dances or drink and gamble at the saloons, didn't do the activities where she might have a chance to get to know a man.

“What happened to you?” Mother demanded as Lydia entered the kitchen. She swatted at Lydia’s dress. “You’re filthy.”

“Well...”

Mother folded her arms across her chest.

“Oh fine. I tripped in a pothole and fell.”

Betty giggled, but Mother shook her head, clucking her tongue. “Child, whatever am I going to do with you? How will I ever see you married if you flitter about town falling into potholes? Now go home and change. Hurry back; you’ve already been away long enough.”

There it was again. Marriage, marriage, marriage. Lydia grumbled to herself as she marched home, kicking pinecones and pebbles as she went. But her mood shifted as her thoughts drifted to Ben, his deep baritone voice saying her name ringing in her ears. By the time she arrived home, her spirits were lifted, and she wasn’t so annoyed at her mother anymore.

Lydia scurried up the stairs to her room and slipped out of her dress. She gasped at the sight, her back side covered in earth. She hadn’t realized how dirty she had been. To think, that was Ben’s final view of her as she left. What a klutz she must have seemed to him. He had been so nice to her about it, but he must have been laughing inside as she walked away, her behind solid brown. Lydia tossed her soiled dress to the side and slipped into a fresh one.

Well, there was no reason to continue thinking about him, especially now that she knew what a sight she had been. Of course Ben had gazed on her so intently; he had to have been shocked by her appearance. Besides, Lydia would never hand over her heart so easily to anyone, not after getting it broken so badly by Andrew. So that was it, Lydia decided. Her thoughts about Ben ended when she exited her home.

Lydia adjusted her bonnet and headed back outside.



# Chapter 5

Ben continued down the main street, but the town didn't seem so dumpy to him any more. Though he'd spent less than five minutes with Lydia, she had somehow managed to breathe life into the way Ben viewed the small town. All of a sudden he noticed the hammering sounds of new construction, the jolly, out-of-tune singing from the nearby saloon, the friendly way men and women greeted each other by name on the street. Maybe this place wouldn't be so bad after all.

Ben tried to focus on the buildings, to learn what was in town. But his thoughts kept returning to Lydia and those dark, mysterious eyes. He wanted to know more about her and the secrets those piercing eyes guarded.

He had to stop, then and there. If there was one thing he had learned from the last town he had been in, it was that he couldn't stay too long, couldn't get too comfortable. At any moment he might have to up and leave. It was pointless to get involved, pointless to even *think* about her. And yet, Ben couldn't stop. Lydia had managed to wiggle her way under his skin, and he couldn't figure out a way to get her out.

But even if Ben would never be able to have any sort of involvement with her, it sure had been nice to speak to a woman again, to gaze into a woman's eyes once more. Crossing the vast open West with no one to keep him company except Bullet was lonely. He'd gotten used to it, he supposed, but that brief encounter with Lydia had woken something in him, reminded him of the way life ought to be.

A life he would never be able to have.

The end of the street was nearing, at least the constructed part of it. Up ahead were the mining encampments, and Ben had no desire to stay with them. To one side of him, a brick building loomed, the nicest building in town, complete with a wrap-around porch. Waterman Hotel, the sign read. It was probably more expensive than the Canyon Lodge he'd seen further back, but it also wasn't bookended by two noisy saloons. There was plenty of money

in his pocket with what he'd earned in the last town, and with what he had seen, Ben was sure he could build a few items and make a few sales without any problem.

Ben guided Bullet over to Waterman Hotel and jumped off. "Looks like this is home for the next few days."

In the lobby, Ben was greeted by a young woman who introduced herself as Samantha. She was bubbly and expressive, her dark eyes dancing as she spoke. She instructed Ben to follow her to his room.

"So how long have you been in town?" Samantha asked as they climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"Less than an hour," Ben said with a chuckle.

"Oh wow. Welcome! Are you passing through or going to stay here for a while?"

It was a loaded question, so much more so than Samantha could have imagined. Ben reminded himself that he had to choose his words carefully, that he had to assume that no one could be trusted.

"Probably passing through," Ben said.

"Oh?" Samantha raised an eyebrow at him. "You're not here to seek your fortune with the others in the gold mines?"

Ben swatted his hand. "Nah. Not for me."

"Then what are you in town for, if not to get rich?"

Another loaded question. Ben should have been prepared for it, should have known that people would have a natural curiosity for where he came from and what he was doing. "I'm seeing the sights of the West."

Samantha stopped at the end of the long hall and swung open the door. "An adventurer, huh?"

Fleeing from Walter and Moses, crossing through deserts and forests alone: it had been an adventure alright. "You could say that," Ben said.

"Come check out your room. I gave you the best one," Samantha said.

Ben peeked into the room, which contained a crude bed covered with a thin blanket and a dresser with two drawers. Considering he had nothing but a few changes of clothes and his tools, the accommodations were perfect.

"Take a look out the window," Samantha said. "This is one of the few rooms with a view of the river."

Ben crossed the room to the window, a thin pane that rattled in the wind. In the distance, he could see a sliver of river, the rest of it obstructed by trees. Had Samantha not pointed it out, Ben might not have even noticed it. But Samantha stood in the doorway expectantly, waiting for Ben's reply.

"It's very nice." Ben set his bags down. "I think this room will do just fine, thank you."

Samantha clasped her hands together. "I'm glad. Now if there is anything you need, anything at all, don't hesitate to ask." She beamed at him, her eyelashes fluttering, and Ben realized she was flirting with him.

"I'll keep that in mind," Ben said. "Thank you."

Samantha hesitated, then turned to go, closing the door behind her.

Ben tossed his hat onto the small dresser and collapsed onto the bed. There wasn't much to the worn-out cotton mattress, but after weeks of sleeping on the ground, it was as if he lay on a cloud. He chuckled to himself as he thought of Samantha's flirtations. But despite her pretty features and cute personality, it was Lydia whom Ben's thoughts returned to, Lydia whom Ben wondered about as he stared up at the ceiling.

He had to stop, he told himself. But his body was weary and tired, his eyelids growing increasingly heavy, and soon Ben had drifted off to sleep, Lydia's face smiling at him in his dreams.



\* \* \*

The crack of a gunshot echoed in the distance. Ben leaped out of bed, awake in an instant, and pulled his own gun from his holster. He glanced around the room, momentarily confused where he was, then let out a long whoosh of air. He was in his hotel room, alone. Safe. At least for the time being.

Once Ben's heart rate returned to normal, his stomach began to growl. He hadn't eaten since breakfast, and he was famished. By the position of the sun, Ben figured it had to be around five. Time to start planning for supper. There were a few cans of beans in his bag, but otherwise he would need to get food and supplies from the general store. Considering it was already late, Ben decided he would treat himself to a meal at the cafe he remembered passing by.

The hotel lobby was busier now than when he arrived, men covered in dirt filing in, their arms droopy and their faces fallen, exhausted from days toiling in the mines and river. Samantha was on the other side of the room, talking with two clearly smitten men. Ben waved and kept going.

Outside, Ben hopped onto Bullet and guided him down Main Street, also much busier than earlier in the day. Groups of men gathered around the saloons, horses pulling carts and wagons jockeyed for position, even a few ladies chatted as they strolled down the side of the dirt road. It was hard to believe how much the landscape of America had changed so rapidly, how bustling towns like these existed in places only inhabited by nature a few short years earlier. And to think, all because of gold, all because of man's unquenchable desire for riches and wealth.

Ben arrived at the cafe and tied Bullet to a post outside. A little bell chimed as he opened the door and stepped inside. The rich smells of beef stew and fried pork tickled his nostrils, and his mouth began to salivate. How long it had been since he'd had a home-cooked meal; how long it had been since he had eaten something that didn't come from a can. The cafe was busy. There were a few families, but the dining hall was filled mainly with men, covered in dirt from a long day at the mines.

Ben found a table off to the side, nothing more than a slab of wood strewn over a few boxes and covered in a calico tablecloth. Save a giant deer head staring down at him from the wall, the decor was lacking, but that was typical in the towns Ben had seen across the West. And as long as the food was good, Ben didn't care what decorated the walls.

A stunning blonde woman bounded up to the table, her smile covering her face. "Hello, there. Haven't seen you here before."

"I just arrived," Ben said.

"I'm Betty. Welcome to Cobble Cafe." She told him about the

food options, describing them in detail, her arms flinging about animatedly.

“I’ll take the cayenne pork chops,” Ben said.

“Excellent choice,” Betty said. “I’m especially proud of that recipe. My husband learned it from his Southern mother and brought it all the way out here.”

“Is that so?” Ben said.

Betty chatted a minute more, then flitted off. Ben drummed his fingers on the table as he waited for his food. His chair was an uncomfortable barrel, and Ben wished there was a back to it, something that he could lean on, get more comfortable in. Maybe this would be a good place to offer his furniture-making skills. They could use some real tables and chairs, and Ben needed some income while he was in town. This could be where to start.

Ben was half lost in his thoughts when he caught sight of someone familiar, snapping him back in an instant. It couldn’t be. He rubbed his eyes, but no, it was her. Lydia, the same girl from before. The same girl he’d been thinking about all afternoon. Her left arm was lined with plates of food, and he watched as she passed them to the men. Near-drooling men who clamored for her attention. A wave of jealousy swept through Ben. But she was across the dining hall and probably wouldn’t even notice him. There was no need to get her attention, no need to get his heart involved. Leave it all alone, he repeated to himself. Leave it all alone.

But... what harm was there in talking to her? Just this one time, and then he’d stay clear.

At a nearby table, Betty passed out the men’s food. When she finished, Ben flagged her over.

“Can I help you with something?” she asked.

He didn’t have to do it. He could tell Betty never mind and send her away. He could stop now before he got involved, got attached.

“The other waitress...” Ben began.

“Lydia?”

“Yes, Lydia,” Ben said. Betty cocked her head, waiting for him to continue. He drew a lungful of oxygen. “Can I see her?”

# Chapter 6

“There’s a man asking for you.”

Lydia loaded her left arm with plates of food. “A man?”

“That’s what I said.” Betty dumped a stack of plates into the washing bin. “He’s at table four. And he’s asking for you.”

“Now that’s exciting!” Mother said.

Lydia scrunched her face, rattling her brain for a man who might ask for her. None came to mind. “I can’t think of anyone who would want to see me.”

“I’ve never seen him before,” Betty said. “All I know is he wants to speak to you.”

“Fine,” Lydia said. “I’ll stop by after I drop off these plates to my table.”

“Don’t pout,” Mother said. “Hold your head up high. This might just be your future husband, and you want to impress!”

Lydia gritted her teeth. To her mother, every man was a potential husband. “Yes, Mother,” she said, her voice gentler than the annoyance she felt on the inside.

As Lydia stepped into the dining hall, her eyes flew in the direction of table four, resting on the same man from earlier in the day. The same man whose horse she had nearly walked under, the same man who had witnessed her fall so disgracefully. Her cheeks burned, and the coils of her stomach tightened. Why would he want to see her again? To tease her of her clumsiness?

Lydia dropped off the plates, then made her way over to table four, dragging her feet as she did.

“Can I help you with something?” Lydia asked, too embarrassed to meet Ben’s eyes.

“Um, no,” Ben said. “I saw you and wanted to say hi. That’s all.”

“Oh?” Lydia raised her eyes and met Ben’s, causing the butterflies in her stomach to go wild. He smiled at her, wide and gleaming. Was he thinking of her fall? Of her filthy backside?

“You work here?” Ben asked.

Lydia bobbed her head up and down, surprised he didn’t remind

her of her incident from earlier. “Yes. This is my family’s cafe. My parents cook in the kitchen, and my sister and I serve the food. And do a million other things.”

Ben raised his eyebrows. “The blonde girl is your sister?”

“Yep.”

“I never would have guessed.”

“I get that a lot,” Lydia said. For all of her life, people had reacted the way Ben had. They had a hard time believing that Betty, with her flawless beauty and sunshine blonde hair, was her sister.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Ben said.

“No offense taken,” Lydia said. “I understand. We don’t look a thing alike.”

“How long has your family had this cafe?” Ben asked.

“About three years,” Lydia said. “Although we started as nothing more than a few tables and a stove under a tent. My father built us this a year or so into it.”

“Impressive,” Ben said. “Hard work and dedication paid off.”

“I suppose,” Lydia said. Ben was still smiling at her, as if he was truly enjoying her presence. Lydia squirmed inside. She was used to men flirting, even proposing marriage, but they only did so because she was a woman and there weren’t many options. None of them looked at her the way Ben was, and Lydia didn’t know what to do with herself.

“What do you mean you suppose?” Ben said. “Look how busy this place is. You did this. You and your family. That’s something to be proud of.”

“Thank you,” Lydia said. She couldn’t remember the last time—if ever—that a man out West had complimented her on her hard work, on the accomplishment of starting a business from scratch. It *had* been hard work, and Lydia had to admit it felt nice having a man recognize that.

“Lydia!”

It was Betty, hissing at her from across the room. Lydia turned, and Betty nodded toward five new tables of men.

“I need to help the new customers,” Lydia said.

“I understand.” Ben paused. “I’m glad I had a chance to talk with you again.”

Warmth traveled through Lydia. This handsome man was glad to talk to *her*? Lydia wished she was more like Betty, who had always known the right thing to say to men. Lydia’s tongue swelled, and all

she could come up with to say was, "Thank you."

Lydia shook her head as she hurried over to greet the new arrivals. *Thank you. Not I enjoyed talking to you, too, or I'm glad you asked for me to stop by* or a million other nice things she could have said back. No, she came up with *Thank you*. Lydia took the customers' food orders, but she only half paid attention, her mind elsewhere, back at the table with Ben.

Tin plates full of food lined the counter as Lydia returned to the kitchen. She had taken too long with Ben, gotten them all behind. But her mother wasn't upset; on the contrary, she was pleased.

"I take it the conversation went well," Mother said.

"He was just being polite, that's all." Lydia's cheeks burned, and she knew she was bright red. Her skin was so pale; she could never hide her embarrassment. She shifted so that her back was to her parents and sister as she loaded up her arm with the plates.

"How do you know that man?" Betty asked, coming alongside Lydia and loading up her arm as well.

"I don't," Lydia said. "Not really anyway."

Betty raised her eyebrow. "And yet he knew who you were. You had to have met him somewhere. Tell me."

Lydia took a deep breath and sighed it out. "I met him when I... well, when I fell earlier today."

A noseey chuckle escaped Betty. "Seriously?"

Lydia's cheeks burned hotter as she pictured herself on the ground, covered in dirt, Ben's horse rearing beside her. Betty wouldn't stop until she knew the whole story, so Lydia decided she might as well tell her. "I was walking along, not paying attention because I was looking at the book I had just borrowed from Sarah. And I about stepped out under Ben's horse, who had gotten spooked."

"Ben?"

"That's his name. Ben. Ben yelled out at me, and I stepped back, right into a pothole, and fell to the ground. So that's how I met him."

Betty shook with laughter, the tin plates clinking against each other on her arm. "Only you, my dear sister. Only you."

"I know." Lydia hung her head.

"He is handsome," Betty said. "And did you notice that heart-shaped birthmark on his jaw line? He must be romantic."

"Oh Betty," Lydia said.



“You’re serving him tonight,” Betty said.

“Oh no. I’ve already been over to his table. I can’t go over there again.”

“Yes you can,” Betty said. “And you will. I’m not bringing him his food.”

“Betty!”

“Nope. Not going to do it.”

“Girls!” Father hissed. “That food is getting cold!”

“Sorry, Father,” Betty and Lydia said in unison.

“You’re serving him,” Betty whispered as they headed to the dining hall.

# Chapter 7

Ben couldn't help but watch Lydia as she came and went from the dining hall to the kitchen and back, bringing out heaping plates of food and clearing emptied ones, all in an endless cycle, back and forth, back and forth. Her sister moved with flair and drama, as if the placement of plates was a show, and it was obvious that she was keenly aware of the way the men clamored for her attention. Lydia's movements were more focused and natural. The men wanted her attention, too, but Lydia didn't give them anything extra. It was hard for Ben to believe those two were sisters. Not only was their outer appearance so opposite, but their personalities seemed to be, too.

As Ben watched Lydia, he couldn't help but grow more curious about her. From the little bit that he had talked to her, he gathered that she was friendly but reserved, and any getting to know her would require a bit of work. What was behind those walls that guarded her?

Of course, he would never know. He couldn't. At any moment, Walter and Moses might show up. At any moment, Ben might have to hop onto Bullet and flee. Besides, he couldn't stay too long, even if Walter and Moses hadn't shown up yet. Only enough time to rest a bit, to make a little money. He'd learned the hard way what happened when he stayed too long, got too comfortable.

While most of the cafe was packed with men, there were a few families, too. Husbands, wives, kids. Ben imagined what life must have been like for the men, working all day, coming home to a loving family. He imagined them building a little home, complete with a porch where they could sit with their wife as the children played in the front. Ben breathed out a sigh of resignation. That was a life that would never be his.

Lydia disappeared into the kitchen for a while, emerging several minutes later, carrying a single plate. Ben watched as she wormed her way around the makeshift tables, her eyes cast down. She was heading his way. As she neared, he noticed her lips were pursed, her brow wrinkled, as if she was deep in thought. She set the plate

down in front of him, heaped with pork chops, potatoes, and mixed vegetables.

The food was still steaming, and Ben waved the steam toward his nose, inhaling deeply. His stomach growled as the scent hit his nostrils, the spiciness of the cayenne awakening his senses. The smell brought him back to his home in Texas, and he pictured his mother at the stove, preparing her own cayenne pork chops. A familiar pang of pain tightened within Ben, reminding him of all that he had left behind.

But there was no point focusing on that right then. Right then he had a hot meal, served to him by a pretty woman. A pretty woman who seemed to be waiting for him to take a bite.

"This looks delicious," Ben said.

"I hope you like it," Lydia said. She shifted, still not meeting his eye.

Ben cut a piece, the pork chops lighting up his taste buds. He savored each bite, the perfect combination of spicy and sweet. Ben swallowed, then said, "Not only does this look delicious, it *is* delicious."

Lydia finally met his eyes. The wrinkle in her brow eased, and the edges of her lips crept up a fraction of an inch. "I'm glad." She paused. "Well, is there anything else I can get for you?"

Ben wished he could think of something, of anything to get her to come back, to get her to stay. "Everything looks perfect."

"Great," Lydia said. And then she left him, picking up finished plates at a table before disappearing again into the kitchen.

Ben ate. In the tables around him, groups of men laughed, clinging their tin cups on the table, slapping each other on the back over something funny that was said. A man and woman gazed into each other's eyes, and Ben was sure they were holding hands under the tablecloth. The muffled buzz of conversation filled the room, making Ben acutely aware that he had no one to talk to, of just how alone he was.

Growing up on a ranch, Ben was used to spending more time with horses than people. But there was still always someone he could talk to when the day's work was done. His parents, his siblings, his rancher friends. Three years of having no one was starting to get to him. There was only so long the soul could go without connection.

But it was better than the alternative. It was better than dead.

Ben savored each bite, making his meal last. Tables emptied and filled again with new customers, new men who were dirty and hungry. Lydia made her rounds, back and forth. Though he tried to resist the urge, Ben couldn't peel his eyes from Lydia. He longed for her to glance his way, to form some sort of connection with her, no matter how small or temporary. She never did.

Ben popped the last bite into his mouth, rubbing his belly as he did. He hadn't felt full like this in months, maybe years. Ben pushed his plate to the edge of the table, hoping it would signal Lydia to come.

It did. Lydia headed his way, once again not meeting his eyes. Ben's heart sped up, ever so slightly. This was it. A *Glad you liked your meal; have a good night* and then it would be over, and Ben would be back in his hotel room, alone once again.

Except Ben didn't want to be alone once again.

Ben's eyes darted around the room, at the barrels, crates, and slabs of wood that were used for tables and chairs. Now was his chance.

"Looks like you enjoyed everything," Lydia said as she approached the table.

"Immensely," Ben said. "As good as my mother's. And that's a compliment."

"Well, thank you then." Lydia picked up Ben's empty plate. "Does that, um, does that mean we will see you here again?"

Did that mean she wanted to see him again? Or was he merely a paying customer she hoped would pay again? "Definitely." Ben hesitated. He'd offered his furniture-making services dozens of times before, but this was the first time he was nervous about it. "Actually, I noticed you don't have any real tables and chairs."

Lydia laughed, a forced laugh. "Well, yes. Those things aren't so easy to come by out here."

She had taken what he was going to say the wrong way. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any offense by that."

"Of course. None taken. Well, have a—"

"You see, I make furniture," Ben began. A voice in his head told him not to continue, not to get himself involved. It was best to stay away from Lydia, to find another place for work, another place that didn't have a woman he was already becoming too attracted to. But the words poured out of Ben, as if someone else had taken over, as if he no longer had control. "I was wondering if you'd be interested

in having me make some tables and chairs for your restaurant.”

“Oh I’m not—”

“I could make you a sample first. And I’ll give you a good deal.”

Lydia cocked her head, as if she was contemplating his words. “I’ll have to ask my Father. He’s the one who makes the big decisions like this.”

“I can wait. I’m in no hurry.”

Lydia bit her lip. “Alright. I’ll go ask him.”

Lydia returned to the kitchen. Ben’s heart thudded against his ribs as he waited. He tried to convince himself he was doing this as a way to make money, a source of income for himself. He did have to find work, after all. What he had with him wouldn’t last forever, especially if he wanted to continue staying at Waterman Hotel. So why not offer his services to a place of business that could clearly use them?

This was a business transaction, that was it. He’d made business transactions like these for the last three years, offering his services in each new town as he made his way across the West. This wasn’t any different from any of those.

Except, deep down he knew that it was.

# Chapter 8

Ben's proposition both frightened and excited Lydia. Frightened her because she was scared of the way he had wormed his way into her mind, causing her to think about him all day, making her start to have *feelings* for him. Frightened because she didn't want to fall for him the way she had Andrew, only to have her heart broken. And excited because, well, because he was oozing with handsomeness and charm, and she was under his spell.

"Lydia! Psst! Lydia!"

A voice pulled Lydia from her thoughts as she worked her way back to the kitchen. It was Jed, one of her frequent customers, who regularly proposed marriage. "Hmm? Yes, Jed?"

"I was wondering if you'd changed your mind?" Jed asked.

"Changed my mind?"

"About making me the happiest man on earth? I may not be rich now, but I will be soon!" Jed opened his mouth wide in a smile, showing off a mouthful of brown and missing teeth.

Lydia forced her smile. "The answer is still no, Jed. But you are always welcome here at the cafe."

The other men at the table snickered as Lydia left, but she ignored them. In the kitchen, Lydia found her father at the stove, her mother washing the dishes.

"Father?" Lydia's pulse skittered; she hadn't realized how nervous she was for her father's answer. If he said no, it meant she might never see Ben again. If he said yes... well, who knew what would happen with a yes.

Father turned, his face muscles tightening as he did. He'd thrown out his back a few months prior, and certain movements still caused him pain. "Yes, Lydia?"

Lydia's chest swelled with a great in-breath. "Father, there's a gentleman here who's offering to make us tables and chairs for a good deal."

Father rubbed his chin. "What kind of deal?"

"I'm not sure. He only said a good deal." Lydia's heart pounded against her ribs. Oh why was she so nervous? She was normally

cool and collected. This wasn't like her at all. What was this man—a man she hadn't even known a full twenty-four hours—doing to her?

"Well let's go find out how good a deal it is," Father said. "Cordelia! Come man the stove for a bit."

Mother dried her hands on a rag and hurried over. The rush of supper had slowed down, and there were only a few pieces of pork chop sizzling in the pans. "What's going on?"

"Possibility of getting us some proper tables and chairs," Father said. "But only if the deal is a good one. I'm not letting no one scam us. You've gotta be careful out here. People will take your money and run. I've seen it happen too many times. Let's go, Lydia."

Lydia led her father across the dining hall. She made a deliberate effort to control her breathing, conscious of each breath in, each breath out. Ben hadn't noticed her yet, and he sat with his hands folded on the table, as if he would wait there all day for her. Except, she reminded herself, it wasn't for her. It was for her father, for a chance to earn a living. This had nothing to do with her at all. But oh was he handsome, with his strong jawline and thick, dark hair, every feature of him chiseled by an artistic expert.

Ben stood as Lydia and her father approached. His eyes lingered on Lydia for a moment—at least, it seemed; perhaps she had imagined it—before moving on to Father. "I'm Ben," he said, stretching out his hand.

Father shook his hand, his face softening. "Joseph Cobble."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Cobble," Ben said.

Lydia stood awkwardly, her fingers toying with her apron. Inside, her emotions swirled within her. Her father's eyes darted between her and Ben. Had he noticed her attraction for Ben? Lydia wasn't like Betty had been before she married, her interest for a man displayed for the whole world to see. She was doing her best to act normal, to act unbothered. But Father was seeing right through her, she knew.

"I hear you have a deal you'd like to offer," Father said.

"I make furniture," Ben said. "I've made plenty of tables and chairs. I can make you a sample, and if you like it, we can move forward with the rest."

"And what's your price?" Father asked.

Ben named an amount. Lydia didn't know much about the worth of things, but the figure seemed low, much too low for how much

work it would require of Ben.

“You drive a mighty bargain,” Father said. “I’ll accept the deal on one account.”

Lydia squeezed her apron with her fingers. What was her Father going to say next?

“And what is that?” Ben asked.

“That you work out all the details with Lydia.”

Lydia’s jaw dropped. She tried to come up with some sort of protest, but the words stuck on her throat, like caramel on an apple. Ben’s head swiveled in her direction, and his lips inched up until a wide grin spread across his face, making Lydia’s knees melt like an icicle on a hot summer day.

“We’re busy Monday through Saturday,” Father continued. “But we close on Sunday. Why don’t you come with us to church, and then you and Lydia can talk after?”

Ben’s eyes searched Lydia’s face, making her feel exposed, as if he could see within her. “It’s a deal,” he said. “It’s definitely a deal.”



## Chapter 9

The sun was long gone, its duties done for the day, when Ben retired to his room at the Waterman Hotel. His belly was full, and for the first time in a long time, his heart was, too. Ben collapsed onto his bed. Even with a nap, his body was still exhausted, though his mind was more awake than ever.

What a whirlwind day it had been. To think, he'd woken that morning thinking it would be a day like the others, traveling across the hills, no one but him and Bullet, sleeping again on the ground. Instead, he'd found this little town—Coyote Pass, he'd learned was its name—met Lydia, had real food for supper, lined up work, and was sleeping in a bed. An actual bed in an actual room. Although he'd always enjoyed sleeping under a blanket of stars, he welcomed having a bit of padding for his weary bones.

But as nice as everything was, Ben knew he had to keep his feelings at bay. The project for the Cobble family would take awhile, and then maybe he could pick up a little more work. The Watermans had no proper reception desk in their hotel, and Ben was sure the rest of the businesses were much the same. There would be plenty of work, as long as the people had the money to pay. And then Ben would leave. He'd keep moving, go on to the next town, keep ahead of Walter and Moses.

Even though his head knew he had to keep his feelings in check, Ben's heart wasn't listening. As he lay in his bed, willing himself to sleep, Lydia kept returning to his mind. In a few days he would get to see her again. And not just see her, spend time with her, talk to her. All business, of course, discussing the furniture needs of the restaurant. Still. Having time with a woman was going to be... nice. He wouldn't be a man if he wasn't looking forward to that.

That was it. It was time with a woman, that was all. It wasn't Lydia in particular; it wasn't that he was getting himself too involved. It was simply enjoying a little time with a woman, as any man would.

Ben tried to remember the last time he'd spent any serious time talking with a woman. There were a few women in the different

towns that he'd met along the way, women he had conversations with here and there, nothing more. They were women whose faces he'd forgotten as soon as he left, women whose names he couldn't remember. And back home there had been women whom Ben suspected wanted to know him better, but Ben was still young then, and he'd always been too busy ranching and riding his horses.

No, there hadn't been anyone who'd stuck in his mind the way Lydia had, like a sweet honey that seeped in and clung to his thoughts. He could picture her as if she stood before him—her pale white skin, her big, intense eyes, her lips as pink as a rose.

Ben turned himself over, pulling the thin blanket over his head. Allowing his affection to grow would only lead to heartache.

But his efforts to force Lydia out of his mind were in vain. Sunday couldn't come soon enough.

# Chapter 10

The night sky was cloudless as Lydia and her parents walked the short distance to their home. The moon was out in full force, and a million stars twinkled up above. Even though she'd lived out West for a few years now, the grandeur of nature still amazed Lydia, and there were times when she could only stand back in awe of God's creation. There had been so little nature back in Philadelphia, where concrete and brick had been her constant surroundings. Lydia stopped, craning her neck back as far as she could, imagining what the stars and moon looked like up close.

"Come along, Lydia," Father said, holding up the lantern.

Lydia sighed and scurried to catch up to her parents. Though she missed Betty's company every night, there were certain nights that Lydia especially missed her sister, and this was one of those nights. Of course she was happy that Betty was married, but it was lonely without her. She hated saying goodbye at the end of the night, hated watching Betty leave with Jackson.

"Are you sure we can afford that?" Mother was saying.

"I think the real question is, can we afford not to?" Father said.

"I'm not following," Mother said.

"Cordelia, this town is growing. The saloons are serving nicer food. Soon, someone is bound to start another cafe. We need to make ours as nice as possible, stay ahead of the competition. Besides, we'll never get a deal as good as the one Ben is giving us."

Lydia was only half-listening to her parents, but her ears perked up at the sound of Ben's name.

"Ben?" Mother asked.

"Ben. That's the young man who will be making our furniture."

"That's very nice of him to give us a good deal," Mother said.

"He is a nice young man," Father said. "And we might get more out of this deal than simply tables and chairs. Isn't that right, Lydia?"

Lydia clamped her teeth tight. Here it came again, the constant meddling of her parents. They had—*finally*, in their minds—gotten Betty to settle down, and now their entire focus shifted to Lydia.

The older one, the one who would soon be an aged, old maid, undesirable to any quality man. They needed to find her someone and quick, or so they believed. In a town where men outnumbered women by a huge margin, there shouldn't be any problem finding a man, they said over and over.

The irony to Lydia was that If they'd stayed in Philadelphia, maybe she would have been married already. Maybe Andrew would have eventually proposed, and he would be married to her instead of her former best friend. Or maybe she would have met someone with a respectable career, not someone who toiled in a dirty mine day after day with nothing to show for it. But no, her parents had dragged her away from any sort of chance at a decent marriage, yet still expected her to marry.

Betty had always been so good at standing up to their parents. She had let their words drip off her like rain on a rooftop, there for a second and then gone; she had stood her ground that she would marry on her own timeline. But Lydia had the disease to please, especially when it came to her parents. Though inside she shouted and clamored, her outward appearance gave nothing away. She said the right things, told them she would try, explained that she feared disappointing them by marrying the wrong man.

"Lydia? Isn't that right?" Father repeated.

"Oh, well, I'm not sure what you mean," Lydia said, making her voice as light as possible.

"That Ben seems like a fine young man," Father said.

"We don't know much about him..." Lydia said.

"I'm giving you the perfect opportunity to get to know much about him, as you say," Father said. "Don't mess this up."

Lydia squeezed her hands into fists, digging her nails into her skin. *Don't mess this up.* Oh how she hated the way her father spoke to her, treating her as if she was a child! Of course, she already *had* messed up any possibility with Ben from the moment she met him, tripping and falling into a pile of dirt. A handsome man like him wouldn't want to be with such a klutzy, bumbling woman like her.

"This is exciting, Lydia," Mother said. "Promise you will at least give him a chance."

Even in the dark, Lydia could see the hope in her mother's eyes. "I'll try."

But it didn't matter if she tried or not. There was no way Ben would be with Lydia, and no way she wanted to hand over her

heart so easily, the way she once did with Andrew.

# Chapter 11

The week dragged by, but finally Sunday came. The sun shone brightly in the sky, the air was warm without being hot, and not a cloud was in sight. Ben hoped it was a good omen for a good day.

Unable to sleep, Ben rose early and had plenty of time to make it to the church. He set out on Bullet, following the directions that Mrs. Waterman gave him the night before: *Go to the end of Main Street. Find a path. Follow the path, and after a little while there was a small church.* But when Ben arrived at the end of Main Street, there were multiple paths to choose from. Ben decided on the most-worn looking path, but it only led to a mine, guarded by a drunk and angry prospector.

“Git out of here!” the man shouted, waving a bottle in one hand and his pistol in the other.

Ben held up his hands in defense. “I’m not looking to steal your gold. I’m looking for the church.”

“This look like a church to you, boy?” The man took a swig from his bottle.

“No, it doesn’t.” Ben eyed the man’s pistol. In his condition, Ben doubted the man had the ability to aim well, but he worried about the pistol firing by accident. Ben could easily take the man out if he had to, but he didn’t want to resort to violence over such a silly misunderstanding. Ben patted Bullet on the neck. “Let’s go,” he said, more to the man than to his horse. He gave a light tug on the reins and squeezed his legs, and Bullet began to walk once more.

It took several attempts, but at last Ben found the correct path. The church was at the end of the path, near an open meadow. It was a small wooden building, complete with a bell and a cross on top. The words “THE CHURCH” were painted in white above the door. Voices singing *Nearer, My God to Thee* floated out of the building, and a twinge of pain knotted in Ben’s stomach. His mother loved that song, and the melody flooded him with memories of her singing loud, not caring how out of tune she was.

Ben tied Bullet to a hitching post, then removed his hat and slipped into the back of the church. The room was stuffy, the open

windows doing nothing to counter the heat of so many bodies. There were two rows of small wooden pews; a wooden cross hanging on the wall behind the pastor was the only decor. An older lady glared at Ben as he took a seat. Ben smiled and nodded hello, but her eyes only narrowed more as she shook her head. *Good grief*, Ben thought.

But the crabby old lady was the least of Ben's concerns. He searched the room for Lydia, his heart fluttering as he found her, sitting toward the front with her family. Her face was hard to see, half hidden by her bonnet. Throughout the service, she faced forward, never once turning his direction, never once taking a glimpse around the back of the church to see if he had arrived. And why would she? They had only met twice, and brief times at that. It was a silly idea to assume that Lydia hadn't slept in anticipation of this day, a silly idea to assume she was as excited as he was for this afternoon. This was a business transaction after all. Nothing more, nothing less.

The pastor droned on as he gave his message, and Ben struggled to pay attention. He ought to, he told himself; living life as he did the last few years did not lend itself to regular church attendance. But preaching was not the pastor's spiritual gift, and Ben was too distracted by Lydia to get much out of the message.

Finally the church neared the end. The congregation stood for a final prayer, and the pastor dismissed them. Ben wanted to rush over to Lydia, but he was stopped by congregants welcoming him. There was a man who introduced himself as Mr. Turner, owner of the general store. After speaking with them for a bit, Ben was stopped by Mr. and Mrs. White, owners of Canyon Lodge. Ben worried Lydia might forget their appointment. Heck, she probably didn't even know he was there at church. Maybe she would think Ben had forgotten and leave. Ben spoke with the Whites long enough to not be considered rude, then excused himself.

Once outside, Ben's eyes darted from group to group, searching for Lydia. Ben's heart sank; she was nowhere to be seen. He had taken too long. The groups chatted around him, laughing with familiarity to each other, and Ben was once again reminded how lonely the last three years had been, how much he missed the companionship of people who knew him.

Ben let out a long breath of air, trying to dispel his disappointment. With his head hung, he rounded the corner of the

church to find Bullet. But then he heard the sound of sweet laughter, and his head flew up. His heart sprang into action at the sight before him: it was Lydia! He drew a lungful of oxygen, breathing it out slowly, commanding himself to calm down. This was a business transaction, he reminded himself. He couldn't let it be anything more, no matter how much his heart ached for companionship.

"Oh, hello Ben," Lydia said. Her body stiffened as Ben approached. The easy smile she had with her friends disappeared, replaced by a nervous pursing of her lips.

"Hi," Ben said. He wished he could read Lydia, wished he could understand her change in demeanor.

"Allow me to introduce you to my friends," Lydia said. "This is Calvin and his wife Sarah. Calvin is the town blacksmith, and Sarah is a wonderful baker."

"Pleased to meet you," Calvin said. "You ever in need of a pickaxe or pan, I'm your man. I have plenty."

"Thank you," Ben said. "But I'm not here for the gold."

"Oh no?" Calvin asked. "Seems every new arrival is. But that's smart. I don't know how much gold they actually find out there. So what do you do?"

Ben was a rancher, a cowboy in his heart. But those days were long gone. "I make furniture."

Calvin raised his eyebrows. "Furniture you say? There are more than a few places that could use some furniture around this town."

"Like us," Lydia said. "Father wants me to meet with Ben so we can discuss the needs of the restaurant."

Once again, Ben's heart lodged in his ribcage at Lydia's words. *Father wants me to meet with Ben.* She was meeting with him out of duty, an obligation. And as it should be. He couldn't get involved, couldn't let these newfound feelings—whatever they were—transform into love.

They chatted for a few minutes. Calvin told a story of how Sarah had saved him twice from an angry customer whose pickaxe he had almost lost. Sarah told him about her shortbread, which she said Calvin devoured each day, causing both of them to giggle. They were a mismatched couple by looks—Calvin handsome, Sarah rather plain—but there was clearly a deep love between the two. The type of love Ben longed for but knew would never be his.

The conversation came to a natural end, and Calvin and Sarah



said goodbye. Lydia glanced down as they left, her fingers toying with the fading fabric of her dress.

“I noticed there’s a pretty meadow here by the church,” Ben said. A rush of blood surged through his body. “Perhaps we can take a walk there. To, you know, discuss business matters.”

Lydia glanced up, her eyes searching his face. “That would be perfect. The perfect place to talk business.”

“That’s right,” Ben said. “Business.”

# Chapter 12

The meadow by the church was one of Lydia's favorite spots, full of color and beauty in the spring, when the flowers were at their peak. As she and Ben approached the meadow, they were greeted by blue flowering summer lupine, sulphur buckwheat, scarlet gilia, corn lilies, and others that Lydia had not yet learned the names of. A mother deer and baby nibbled on the grass, and a squirrel scampered across the path not too far ahead of them.

On occasion, Lydia would stroll around the meadow after church with Sarah or Betty, enjoying the quiet away from the hustle and bustle of Main Street. The meadow was peaceful, a reminder that there was tranquility in the world if one took the time to look for it. But right then, with Ben not too far from her side, Lydia felt anything but peaceful. Her entrails tied themselves into knots; her pulse tapped haphazardly through her veins. She was a basket of nerves. And for what? For a conversation about tables and chairs?

Though more quiet and reserved, Lydia never had a problem speaking up when she needed to. So it made no sense to her why she felt as she did when Ben was near. Why everything about her vanished, replaced by this other Lydia. A different Lydia whose knees buckled, who didn't know how to act or what to say. She wished she could gain control over her feelings, these feelings she did not want to have—especially considering how much her parents did want her to have them.

"This is perfect weather for a walk," Ben said.

"Indeed," Lydia said. "Perfect."

A silence fell upon them. Unable to sleep much the night before, Lydia had come up with a list of possible conversation topics should she need them. But with her stomach flip flopping, every idea escaped her. What a bore Ben must think she was.

"So what brought your family out West?" Ben asked after a bit. "To start a cafe?"

"Oh no," Lydia said. "At the beginning, my father was like everyone else who came out West. He wanted to find gold."

"And then what happened?"

“He tried. But he wasn’t finding anything. Maybe a flake here and there, but nothing to live on. Mother had brought her oven, the one thing she had insisted on bringing. So Mother, Betty, and I set up a little place to cook for the prospectors. It wasn’t much, just our oven and a few tarps we strung up for shade. The town wasn’t much at that point, either, a few hundred people. But most of the residents were men without wives, and we were their one source of a home-cooked meal.”

“And now look at you. A full-fledged cafe.” Ben smiled at Lydia, making her squirm. “And your Father works there now, too? Did he decide to give up his quest for gold?”

“Yes.” Lydia tore off a stalk of corn lily and pulled off the petals, one by one. “It was a combination of several factors. He hurt his back, and he saw how prosperous our cooking was, at least in comparison to his gold prospecting. So once his back healed, he built us our cafe and took over the role of the main cook. Or chef, as he prefers to be referred to as.”

“Had he ever cooked before?” Ben asked.

“Never,” Lydia said. “But he thinks the prep work and the serving and the cleaning and the dishes are women’s work. I guess cooking is the least offensive task to his macho ego.”

Ben pounded on the top of his chest in a manly fashion. “Of course. We men don’t do dishes.”

A gentle laugh tickled Lydia’s throat. Her nerves relaxed a little bit. Once they got going, she realized that talking with Ben was easier than she had expected. She liked the way he paid attention to what she said, the way he asked her questions.

“You mean you’ve never stuck your hands in scalding water to scrub a pot?” Lydia asked.

Ben shuddered. “Heavens no!” he said, making Lydia giggle again. His face lit up as she laughed, as if making her laugh pleased him. A warm sensation rushed through Lydia’s body.

“You men don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Can’t say I have any desire to find out.” Ben paused. Then: “Are you glad you came out here?”

Lydia turned her head away, focusing on a hawk that screeched as it soared overhead. Glad she came out there? She had made the best of a horrible situation, but no, she wasn’t glad at all. They had lived a nice life in Philadelphia, neither poor nor rich but comfortable. She had had friends and a man whom she hoped to

marry. There was no reason to leave, other than Father's crisis over his perceived failure as his friends and brothers succeeded in life and business while he remained stagnant. And without any riches or gold to show for their years out West, Lydia had come to accept that they would never return to Philadelphia again. Besides, there was nothing for her back in Philadelphia. No home, no belongings, no prospects. No Andrew.

But none of these were things Lydia was ready to burden Ben with. "It's been an adventure, I can say that."

"That must have been a difficult change, to go from a bustling city to a tiny town like Coyote Pass." Ben's voice was soft, as if he somehow understood more than what Lydia had voiced.

"It was," Lydia said, relaxing even more. She hadn't gone on a walk with a man since that last walk with Andrew, and Lydia had forgotten how nice it was to talk to a man privately. As much as she loved her time with her sister and girlfriends, there was something about a conversation with a man that lifted her spirits, that put a spring in her step, something that no other woman could do. "When we first arrived, Coyote Pass was more of an encampment than a town. But a few men—not my father—found a good amount of gold, and the town's population exploded. I don't think anyone else has had any more luck like that, but they still keep coming."

"That's good for your business," Ben said.

"It is," Lydia said. "Every month is busier than the last... So. It's your turn. What brought you out here to California?"

"Oh, well..." Ben's body stiffened, and a faraway look glazed his eyes. "Change of scenery, I suppose."

"You aren't here for the gold?" Lydia asked.

"No..." Ben's voice trailed off. There was something there, something he didn't want to talk about. Lydia wondered what it was, what painful memories he had left behind. She wouldn't press further.

"I detect a bit of a twang," Lydia said. "Texas?"

"Am I that obvious?" Ben asked, his grin returning. His heart-shaped birthmark was even more pronounced when he smiled, the skin lifted and pulled taut.

"Which part?" Lydia asked.

"Tiny town. You wouldn't have heard of it."

Lydia opened her mouth to ask which one, then shut it. For some reason, Ben was aloof about his reason for leaving, where he

was from. Maybe he had a female-equivalent of her Andrew whom he did not wish to speak about or some other good reason. She was enjoying the conversation, and she didn't want to do anything to ruin it. Better to not press any further.

"Did you make furniture in this tiny town?" Lydia asked, hoping the question was safe.

"No, actually." Ben chuckled. "Believe it or not, I was a rancher."

"A rancher?" Lydia debated if she should ask how he went from ranching to making furniture. She decided against it.

"Ya. My family owns a ranch. So growing up, I spent my days on the back of a horse herding cattle, and my nights protecting them from cattle rustlers and wolves. It's a good thing I love horses, because I spent a lot of time on them."

"That sounds exciting," Lydia said. There was passion in his voice as he described growing up on a ranch, and Lydia wondered what could have driven him to leave.

"Do you like riding horses?" Ben asked.

"Actually, I've never ridden one," Lydia said.

Ben's eyebrows flew up; his jaw dropped. "You've never ridden a horse?" he said, as if Lydia's words had been the most incredulous thing he'd ever heard. "Not even once?"

Lydia shook her head. "Never."

Ben rubbed his face with the side of his hand. "How is it possible to live out West without ever having been on a horse?"

"I grew up in Philadelphia, not the West. And out here, everything is within walking distance."

"I've never met a woman who has never been on a horse," Ben said.

"Until now," Lydia said, not sure what else to say.

"We're going to have to change that." Ben stopped, gazing directly into Lydia's eyes, striking her breathless. The hues of his hazel eyes shimmered in the sunlight, and Lydia waited, afraid to move, afraid of what he might say next. "Perhaps you'd like a ride sometime?"

Lydia bobbed her head up and down, slowly. Was he saying it just to be cordial, with no real intentions to take her for a ride? Or was there something there, some beginning to feelings that they both weren't quite sure what to do with? "That would be nice," Lydia said, keeping her voice steady.

They walked in silence for a moment, uncertainty lingering in the air. Somewhere in the distance a coyote howled.

“So about those tables,” Ben said. “How many do you think you will need?”

Business. He was there to talk business, Lydia reminded herself.

“Twenty-four would be good,” Lydia said. “Square. It will be so nice to be able to easily push them together for any larger groups that come in.”

“Shall I assume ninety-six chairs?” Ben asked.

Lydia tried to do the math in her head. Normally such a simple equation wouldn’t be a problem, but with Ben so close, she found her mind muddled, unable to properly think.

“Yes,” Lydia said after a moment. “Yes, ninety-six chairs.”

Ben described the vision he had for the chairs. He suggested he give them a rustic look, to go with the feel of the cafe, particularly the deer head on the wall. “I’ll get something made this week to show you. And if you like it, I’ll make the rest.”

“That would be great.” A faint excitement bubbled within Lydia at the idea of seeing Ben again.

They chatted a bit more as they rounded the meadow. Ben told her of different projects he had done over the years. Lots of tables and chairs, a few beds, an entire cabinet system in a newly built house. He was self-taught, he said. Lydia didn’t understand how or when he had transitioned from rancher to furniture maker, but she didn’t ask. Maybe that would come on a different day.

“We’ve been out here a while,” Ben said. “I better get you home. I don’t want your parents getting mad at me for having you out too long.”

“It has been awhile,” Lydia said, disappointed for the afternoon to come to an end.

“I’d hate for them to not trust me... I mean, I don’t want them to not trust me to make them tables and chairs, if I can’t even get their daughter back at a reasonable time.”

A rush of dismay swept through Lydia’s body, but she chided herself for the feeling. This was all business, after all. Business and nothing more. Ben had no feelings for her, and she needed to stop any that she was developing then and there. The only outcome would be heartbreak. She’d gone through that once with Andrew. There was no need to go through it again.

“You’re right,” Lydia said. “I better get back.”

# Chapter 13

He shouldn't have enjoyed himself so much, but Ben had. He'd enjoyed every minute, every second of his time with Lydia. There had never been another woman who made Ben feel the way he felt when he was around Lydia, though he couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was about her that got to him so much. Her subtle beauty, the intensity of her eyes, her humble but kind personality. Every time he talked to her, he was left wanting to know more about her, about the secrets she hid behind that reservedness.

Nearby, Bullet snorted, as if he could read Ben's thoughts. "Don't worry, boy," Ben said. "I'm not going to get involved with her. I know I can't."

Ben was in the woods, at a quiet spot he had found, away from the claims of the miners, away from the bustle of Main Street. In the days since arranging the deal with Mr. Cobble, Ben had set up a workstation, chopped down multiple trees, and cut the wood into boards that could be used for tables and chairs. Now that Ben had a better idea of what Lydia needed, he could set to work. He'd craft one table and one chair first and then ensure they were acceptable.

And it would be a good excuse to see her again.

Ben liked that he had a reason to see Lydia again; he liked knowing he would spend time with her in the near future, even if it was only for a few minutes. He knew nothing could develop past enjoying her company, but as he worked, he decided there was nothing wrong with that, nothing wrong with having a casual friend in Lydia. It was good for his soul after being alone all these years.

Ben decided he would make a table pedestal style, with a single fancy leg in the middle. It would take a bit longer to make, but it would be nicer for the cafe in the long run. They would look like a real restaurant then, what Lydia would have been used to back in Philadelphia.

As he prepped the wood, Ben hummed softly, songs he and his brothers used to sing on their long cattle drives. It had been awhile since he'd hummed or sang, but his heart felt a teensy bit lighter than it had in ages. Maybe it was because he got to sleep in an

actual bed. Maybe it was because of Lydia.

A twig cracked. Ben jumped at the sound. Instinctually, he dropped his calipers and pulled his pistol from his holster. Another twig cracked. Walter and Moses. Ben had only been in town a few days, and already they had found him. As quietly as possible, Ben darted behind the closest tree. A nearby manzanita tree shook. Ben cocked his pistol, ready if need be.

The manzanita tree shook again, and a second later a deer stepped into view. Relief whooshed from Ben's decompressing lungs. He placed his pistol in its holster and returned to his workstation, causing the deer to flee.

"Am I going crazy?" Ben asked Bullet. The horse didn't respond. "Sometimes I think I am. But can you blame me? They've almost caught me twice."

Ben picked up his caliper and measured his wood, the lightness of his heart gone. How he hated what his life had become, how he never would be able to actually have a life. He was alive but not living. What he would give to not be on the run, to not be constantly looking over his shoulder for Walter and Moses. What he would give to do his work and come home to a wife, a home-cooked meal, children grabbing his legs and begging him to play.

Ben paused as he envisioned himself walking home, as he had done so many times, a pretty wife waiting for him at the doorway. Only this time the woman wasn't faceless, as she usually was.

It was Lydia.

Ben jerked his head back and forth, trying to expel the image. He couldn't let himself even think of such things, couldn't let himself dream of Lydia being anything more than his friend. He had to protect his heart.

And hers.



# Chapter 14

“Ben is here,” Betty said with a giggle.

“Ben?” A smile tugged at the corners of Lydia’s lips, but she fought the pressure, fought to keep them normal.

But Betty knew her too well. “Don’t play coy with me. As if I don’t know you’re trying not to smile.”

Lydia abandoned her fight, and her lips flew up. “Maybe he has the chair and table samples.”

“Maybe,” Betty said. “Why don’t we go find out?”

Lydia set down the knife she had been using to chop potatoes and removed her apron. Her pulse quickened, and an excitement zipped through her. This wasn’t good, she told herself. She barely knew him; she shouldn’t be getting that eager to see him so soon. Her chest puffed out as she took a long, slow inhale, calming her nerves. Then she followed her sister out of the kitchen.

Lydia’s heart flew to her throat as she caught sight of Ben. She wasn’t the type who allowed herself to be taken by the physicality of a man, but Ben stormed past any walls she had set up around her emotions, wiggled his way under her skin and stayed. From his tousled hair to his hazel eyes to his muscular build, every part of him was flawless. Even the way he stood, with his arms folded casually as he talked with Mother and Father, oozed manliness and strength. A man hadn’t gotten to her this way since, well, since Andrew.

“Lydia. Betty. Come check out this beautiful chair Ben has made,” Father said.

Ben turned in her direction. As his eyes fell on Lydia, his face lit up. Or was she imagining it? Betty was the one who had always had that effect on men, not her.

“Oh wow!” Betty gushed. “This is beautiful! Isn’t it, Lydia?”

Lydia nodded, running her fingers over the curved back of the chair. It was far more detailed than she had expected. She had figured he would do a simple design, something functional but inelegant. But this chair was exquisite, with its openwork back and curved splat, its cabriole legs. The craftsmanship was something she

would have expected back in Philadelphia, not out West.

"Well?" Ben asked.

Lydia glanced around the dining hall, at all the barrels and boxes and slabs of wood covered in mismatched tablecloths that were showing their wear. She pictured the room full of these fancy chairs and actual tables, like the restaurants in her hometown. They were taking the cafe a step up, helping to make Coyote Pass a real town with real offerings. "It's... amazing!" Lydia said.

The smile on Ben's face broadened. "I'm glad you like it."

"Like it?" Betty said. "Lydia *loves* it! Don't you, Lydia?"

Ben gazed deep into Lydia's eyes, making her squirm. The eyes of her mother, father, and sister all bored into her, watching how she would react. Lydia's cheeks burned, and even without a mirror she knew they were a deep red. Being the center of attention was not what she was accustomed to; that had always been Betty's role.

"Yes, I do love it," Lydia said, managing to keep her voice steady.

"Imagine our little dining hall with all these chairs," Mother exclaimed.

"It's going to take our cafe to the next level," Father said. "Like I told you."

"I have a table ready for you to see, too," Ben said. "I'll borrow a cart from the livery stable and bring it as soon as I am able."

"Why wait?" Father said. "Lydia, why don't you go with Ben to give your approval on the table?"

"Oh, um." Lydia's cheeks burned again, as if someone had brought a match to her face. Ben was watching her, his face anticipatory. Lydia blinked twice. She had to be dreaming it, had to be dreaming that Ben seemed to want her to say yes. "I'm a bit behind on prepping the vegetables..."

"I'll take care of that. You know I'm a whiz with the knife." Betty lifted and dropped her arm in swift motions, imitating chopping with a knife.

Father pinned his arms over his chest, his eyes narrowing. Not going wasn't a choice.

"As long as no one minds..." Lydia's voice trailed off.

"Great!" Ben said. "I can't wait for you to see it."

Lydia bit her lip, a storm of emotions raging through her. "Let me grab my bonnet."

# Chapter 15

The walk to Ben's work area was about twenty minutes. Ben sauntered along, trying to make the time with Lydia stretch, savoring every moment he had with her. As she was each time they met, she started out seemingly nervous, her eyes frequently cast downward, her fingers toying with the fabric of her dress. Ben started with easy topics like the current weather and how busy the restaurant had been that week, things that would put Lydia at ease. By the time they reached his work area in the woods, Lydia was starting to relax. She was a challenge, in a way, like an onion whose layers had to be peeled back one by one. Ben liked the challenge, liked figuring out a way to make her feel more at ease.

"Here we are." Ben flung his arm out in a grand gesture. "Welcome to Ben's Furniture Shop."

Lydia giggled. She had a pleasing giggle, like the pleasant sound of a brook as it trickled down a mountain. "It's very... nice."

"It's got everything I need. Work bench. Tools. Fresh breeze."

"And your horse," Lydia said.

"And my horse," Ben said.

Lydia walked over to Bullet and scratched his head. Bullet rubbed his nose against Lydia, causing her to giggle once more.

"That means he likes you," Ben said.

"He's a beautiful horse. So gentle."

"When would you like to learn how to ride him?" Ben asked.

Lydia's arm froze. She turned, her face suddenly serious, her expression a mix of excitement and fear. Was it over getting on a horse? Or... was it over the time she'd spend with him? "I—Well, I don't have a lot of free time, not with all that I have to do at our cafe."

Here was his chance to get out of it, to get out before he got in too deep. Ben's inner voices were arguing, each trying to outdo the other. He shouldn't have offered to teach her to ride. The more time he spent with her, the more risk he was taking of falling for her, of ending with a broken heart. But it was only a riding lesson or two. Besides, Ben could use some company before he was back on the

run again, alone.

“How about on Sundays?” Ben asked.

Lydia’s shoulders rose as she took in a deep breath. Oh how he wished he knew what she was thinking, knew what was going on in that mind of hers. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

They stood for a moment, neither moving, the only sound the chirp of a bird. A gentle breeze blew around them, swirling their emotions through the air. Ben studied her face, studied the brown hues of her eyes, the softness of her blushing cheeks, wishing he knew her well enough to understand what she was feeling right then. Lydia was so small and lovely, and a fierce desire to protect her swept through him.

Except the reality was that the best way to protect her was to stay far, far away.

“So, um, would you like to see the table?” Ben asked.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Lydia said.

Ben had covered the table with a tarp for protection, and with a single yank, he pulled it off with dramatic flair. “Voilà!”

Lydia gasped. “It’s beautiful!”

Ben beamed as Lydia ran his fingers over the table. He had worked hard on it, harder than he had worked on any other piece of furniture. The table had a single pedestal in the middle with a tripod base, and a pie crust design ran along the edge of the table top.

“I’m glad you approve,” Ben said.

“This is more lovely than I had ever imagined.” Lydia cocked her head. “How did a rancher like you get so good at furniture making?”

A lump filled Ben’s throat. Panic bubbled within him anytime anyone asked him questions of his past, and he worried he might give something away that would reveal his secrets and put him in danger. That must have been what had happened in the last town, when Walter and Moses had come so close to finding him. Ben must have said something to someone, though he couldn’t figure out what, but something nonetheless that revealed his true identity.

But at the same time, Ben didn’t want to alienate Lydia. Of course she would ask questions of his past; it was only natural. He had to find a way to answer her simply without panicking, without making her feel awkward for asking what to anyone else would be a simple question.

“When we were on the cattle drives, I would find pieces of wood and carve them during the downtime. And when we were back home, I was always making end tables and chairs or other small items.” Ben paused. “And then when I left home, well, I needed a way to make money. So I made furniture.”

Lydia’s eyes searched his face. She wanted to ask him more, he could tell. For a brief moment, the temptation to pour his heart out, to tell her everything that he’d endured for the last three years swept through Ben. It would be so nice to have someone who understood him, someone he could share his darkest secrets with, to not have to carry his burdens alone. But he couldn’t. It wasn’t safe for him, and it wasn’t safe for Lydia. She could never know.

“Well, you’re quite the craftsman,” Lydia said.

“Thank you. I—I wanted to make sure this table in particular was extra special.”

Lydia cast her eyes downward, her cheeks coloring. “You definitely succeeded.” She paused. “I better get back to work. There’s always so much to do to prep for suppertime.”

Ben frowned. He had known he wouldn’t have much time with Lydia, but still he hated for the time to end. “If you must. I’ll walk you back.”

“Oh, you don’t have to. I can find my way back.”

“What kind of gentleman would I be if I let you alone out there? There are scoundrels of all kinds lurking everywhere. And coyotes.”

Lydia giggled. “I’ve never actually seen a coyote. Only heard them.”

“You certainly won’t see any if I’m around.” Ben pounded his chest with his fist. “One look at me and they take off running.”

Lydia giggled again, as he’d hoped she would. Like sweet candy was to his tongue, so was her giggle to his ears. “Well when you put it that way, how can I say no?”

Ben recovered the table with the tarp. He was getting too close to the edge, he knew, too close to the edge of the cliff. If he wasn’t careful, he would soon be falling for her.

Falling hard and fast.

# Chapter 16

“Good morning!”

Lydia turned to see her friend Sarah standing at the kitchen doorway, her basket full of the cakes and cookies that the customers could purchase with their meals.

“Morning,” Lydia said. She helped Sarah unload the goodies onto the counter.

“Who made that chair up front?” Sarah asked.

Lydia’s cheeks burned, as they seemed to now do any time anyone mentioned anything regarding Ben. “Oh, no one. Well, I mean, someone. It’s not that no one built the chair. It’s just, I mean, no one special to me.”

Betty laughed as she gathered plates of steaming eggs. “Convincing, isn’t she Sarah?”

Sarah raised her eyebrows. “So who is this ‘no one’? Is it Ben?”

Lydia glanced at her parents working at the stove. Despite their backs being turned to her, she knew their ears had perked up, waiting for her response.

“It’s not too busy right now,” Lydia said. “Why don’t I help you carry in the rest of the cakes?”

An amused expression crossed Sarah’s face. “Alright.”

Lydia led the way out front, where Sarah had left the wagon she used for delivering her goodies.

“So? You going to tell me who this no one is, or do I have to keep guessing?” Sarah said.

“Yes, it’s Ben.” Lydia shrugged her shoulders. “There’s not much more to say.”

“Not much more to say?” Sarah said, her voice indignant. “I *never* see you get flustered over a man. And you were flustered in there.”

“He is handsome. I have to admit that,” Lydia said.

“He is,” Sarah agreed. “And that heart-shaped birthmark? Cupid must have left that himself.”

Lydia giggled. “That’s what I thought, too.”

“You’re flustered,” Sarah said. “So how many chairs is Ben

making for you?"

"A whole dining hall's worth! And tables, too. Wait til you see the table design. It's exquisite."

"That's fantastic," Sarah said. "That means you'll have plenty of opportunities to see Ben again."

Lydia bit her lip. Should she tell Sarah about the horse lesson that was planned for Sunday? She might as well, she decided. Sarah was bound to find out one way or another, and she didn't want her offended that she hadn't heard it from Lydia first. "Actually, he's teaching me how to ride a horse after church."

Sarah's eyebrows sprang up; her jaw dropped. "He's *what*?"

"Teaching me how to ride a horse." Lydia cast her eyes down and circled the toe of her black boot in the dirt.

"Oh Lydia!" Sarah exclaimed. "He *has* to be interested in you."

"I doubt that," Lydia said, remembering how she and Ben met, how clumsy she had been in front of him. She'd ruined any chance of making a good impression.

"Why else would he want to give you riding lessons?"

"Well, he's new here. He doesn't know anyone else, and he probably doesn't have anything else better to do."

"Riiight," Sarah said, her tone unconvinced. "You know who you remind me of?"

"Who?"

"Me."

"I'm not following."

"You remind me of me, before I married Calvin," Sarah said. "I gave you every excuse why Calvin would never be interested in me, and you tried to convince me to give him a chance. And who ended up being right? You! And look how happy Calvin and I are now. All because I took a risk."

"But this is different," Lydia said. She thought of Andrew, who once upon a time she believed was interested in her, who broke her heart and married her best friend instead. It was clear she lacked the ability to judge if a man had true feelings for her, and Lydia had no desire to go through a broken heart again.

"This isn't different," Sarah said. "You're suffering from the same lack of confidence that I did."

Sarah had indeed once suffered from lack of confidence. As a result of an abusive marriage, she hadn't seen her true worth. But meeting Calvin after learning of her first husband's death restored

Sarah, gave her a confidence that she carried with her daily. She was still shy, but Sarah now walked into the cafe with her head held high. Lydia longed for a true love like Sarah's, but she also didn't want to be a fool about it, not after what happened with Andrew.

"I'm not lacking confidence," Lydia said. "I'm just... being realistic. Ben has no desire for me outside of friendship."

"Give it a chance. Be open to it. That's all I'm saying." Sarah passed Lydia a bag of cookies from her wagon. "You never know what might happen."

"Well, we'll see," Lydia said, skeptical of Sarah's words. "We'll see."



# Chapter 17

Ben didn't hear a word Pastor Johnson said as he delivered his message. He went through the motions, standing and sitting at the right places, singing the hymns semi on key. But he was too distracted, his mind too occupied with ideas on how he would teach Lydia to ride Bullet. His eyes drifted to Lydia nonstop throughout the service, as if she had some kind of magnetic pull over him that he was physically incapable of resisting. Her head was tilted toward the pastor, her eyes never leaving the front of the church. As it should be, Ben told himself, though he found himself longing for her to glance his way, for some sort of signal that she, too, was excited for their afternoon.

The church service came to a close. Lydia stood, holding her Bible close to her chest as she did. For the first time, she glanced Ben's way, her eyes stopping on him. She'd caught him staring at her, but Ben didn't care. Ben smiled and waved. Lydia hunched her head into her shoulders as the corners of her lips turned up into a shy grin. It was movements like those that only endeared her more to Ben, that only served to fuel his desire to understand her better, like coal thrust in a fire.

He made his way out of the church, worming his way through the groups of people who chatted in the aisles, greeting a few on the way. Ben stood off to the side, watching as people exited the church, chatting and laughing as they did. They couldn't have lived in this town for more than a few years, and yet they had formed a camaraderie, as if they'd known each other for years. A longing swept through Ben, and he missed the companionship of his brothers and father on the cattle drives, the familiarity of his friends back home. He would never again have what these church folks had; he would never have a place where he belonged, a place where a shared set of experiences could unite people no matter where they were from.

Ben's spirits lifted as Lydia emerged from the church, accompanied by her sister and Jackson. He shoved his depressive thoughts to the side, determined to focus on the moment. Time with

Lydia wouldn't last forever, but he could at least enjoy it while it did.

"Good morning," Jackson said as the trio headed his way.

"Mornin'," Ben replied. He shook Jackson's hand, nodded to the ladies.

"I hear you're teaching my sister how to ride a horse!" Betty said, causing Lydia to cast her eyes down, her cheeks to blush.

"I am," Ben said.

"Lydia can't wait. She's been going on and on about it all week!" Betty said.

"Betty!" Lydia hissed. "I have not! I mean, I am very appreciative of the opportunity. I just—I haven't... Oh Betty!"

Ben laughed, his fondness for Lydia only increasing. "I've been looking forward to it, too," Ben said, trying to put Lydia at ease.

"See," Betty said. "Nothing to be embarrassed about."

Lydia shot Betty a narrow-eyed look, but she didn't say anything further.

They chatted for a few minutes. Jackson told Ben about the horses he had on the farm growing up, and Ben told about a few of his cattle drives. Ben nodded and responded in the right spots, but he only half listened. Inside, anticipation rushed through his body. He wanted to get out to the meadow, to spend some time alone with Lydia. At last Betty and Jackson said goodbye.

"Are you ready?" Ben asked.

Lydia nodded, short quick nods. She watched after her sister, as if she was nervous to be left by herself with Ben.

"You'll do great. I can feel it in my bones," Ben said. Was she more apprehensive about being on a horse for the first time... or spending time with him? They walked in silence over to the hitching post where Bullet waited, and Ben untied his rope. "I brought a special rope with us called a lead rope. I thought you could lead Bullet out to the meadow. This will help you establish respect and attention from him."

Lydia took the rope from Ben, her delicate fingers brushing against his as she did, causing his heart to burst into a series of spluttering palpitations. Ben demonstrated how to stand, the words tripping out of his mouth as he spoke. Why was it that one simple touch of her fingers could cause him to fall into such disarray?

"Let's go, boy," Lydia said, and Bullet followed behind her. A broad smile filled Lydia's face. "He's coming!"

“You’re a natural,” Ben said.

They headed to the meadow, leaving the church behind. Ben’s eyes scanned the area around him, checking to make sure they weren’t being followed, to make sure Walter and Moses weren’t waiting for him up ahead. He reminded himself to relax. They hadn’t found him, at least not yet.

“There’s a mounting block over there,” Ben said, pointing up ahead. He’d found a discarded wooden box and brought it to the meadow before church in preparation.

“A mounting block?” Lydia asked.

“Well, it’s actually a regular box. But we’re going to use it as a mounting block.” As they approached the box, Ben asked, “Are you ready?”

“I—I think so,” Lydia said.

“Bullet is one of the sweetest horses I’ve ever met,” Ben said. “And I’ve met a lot of horses in my time. Alright, go ahead and climb up on the mounting block.” He offered Lydia his hand. She hesitated, then placed her hand in his as she climbed up. Her small hand fit so nicely in his, and Ben found himself longing to mesh their fingers together, to hold it and never let go. In an instant the moment was over, and Lydia was ready for the next instructions. Ben drew a lungful of oxygen, chastising himself to get a grip. This was a riding lesson and nothing more. “So the basic concept is you’re going to put your left foot in the stirrup and pull yourself up. After that, you’ll swing your right leg over.”

Lydia glanced down at her dress. “But... how do I do that in a dress?” Her cheeks burned a bright red, as if she hadn’t considered how she might mount a horse in a dress.

“This isn’t stuffy England,” Ben said. “Out here, ladies can ride however they please.”

“Oh, well...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t look,” Ben said.

Lydia lowered her neck into her shoulders, something Ben noticed she did whenever she was embarrassed, endearing her all the more to him.

“Okay, so go ahead and grab the reins,” Ben said. “Hold the far rein a little tighter. This will help steady you. There you are. So you’re actually going to use your free leg for balance. Steady, steady. Good. Now, you’re going to use your legs only to get onto the horse, not your arms. They’re only for supporting you, not for

pulling yourself up. Just push hard with your leg. Once you get over the horse, slowly lower yourself into the saddle. Bullet doesn't spook too easily, but we don't want to take that risk. You got all that?"

"Use legs. Arms only for support. Don't land hard," Lydia said.

"Perfect," Ben said. He covered his face with his hands but peeked through his fingers. "Let's do it."

Lydia let out a grunt, then threw her leg over Bullet. Her movements were clumsy and ungraceful, and Ben bit his lip to keep from laughing. But she made it up on the first try, and Bullet stood unfazed.

"I'm up!" Lydia exclaimed.

"Excellent!" Ben said. "How does it feel?"

Lydia sat up straight. The muscles of her face relaxed, and a shy grin worked its way across. "It feels amazing."

"There's no other feeling in the world like riding a horse. Alright, so let's go over some basics." Ben showed Lydia the proper way to hold the reins, how to master balancing on the saddle, and explained how to stay calm and not spook the horse. Lydia listened attentively, her face serious and concentrating, as if she absorbed everything he said like a sponge. "Are you ready to try a little walk?"

Lydia nodded. "I'm ready," she said, her voice more confident, the quiver gone.

"I'll be right here next to you the whole time," Ben said.

"I'm glad," Lydia said.

*I'm glad.* Two simple words, simple words that could mean anything. But there was something deeper in the way she said them, something implied in her tone that told him she wasn't merely glad he was there to help her with her riding.

Or maybe he was imaging it, and there wasn't anything deeper. Maybe it was only wishful thinking on his part, the hallucinations of a man who had gone so long without human connection.

Ben forced himself to ignore the nonsense that filled his mind. "To get Bullet to walk, we're going to give him both physical and verbal cues. First, you're going to get his attention with a light pull to the reins. This is going to tell him it's time to pay attention. Next, you're going to signal that it's time to move forward. You'll do that by keeping your legs straight and squeezing with your calves. At the same time, we're going to give him a verbal cue by making a sort of

kissy noise once or twice.”

“A... kissy noise?” Lydia asked.

“Like this.” Ben demonstrated the sound.

“Right. Of course,” Lydia said, giggling.

Once more, Ben’s heart skipped a beat. Even the mention of the word *kissy* had made Lydia flustered. Was it possible she felt as he did, a longing for each other growing inside?

“So let’s do this,” Ben said.

Lydia tugged gently on the reins and squeezed with her legs. “Let’s go, boy,” she said, making her kissy sound twice. Bullet moved forward in a slow walk.

“You did it!” Ben said.

“I did! I’m riding a horse!” Lydia glanced down at Ben, her face beaming with pride.

“Keep your focus straight ahead,” Ben said. “Horses will pick up on even the most subtle of cues, and we want Bullet to know he’s supposed to go straight.”

Time seemed to stand still as they circled the meadow again and again. Ben didn’t want the day to end, didn’t want to return to the reality of what his life had become. Without knowing it, Lydia was showing him the joy that a normal life had to offer, the joy that having a woman by your side could bring. Ben didn’t want to leave the meadow.

And he didn’t want to leave Lydia.

“Are you ready to try a slow trot?” Ben asked.

“Do you think I’m ready?” Lydia asked.

“I think so,” Ben said. “And I’ll jog alongside you. Okay, let’s cover a few things first. First, don’t let yourself bounce in the saddle. You don’t want to fight the movement of the horse. You want to move along with it. So keep your posture straight. Once you become more advanced, I can teach you how to post with the trot. But for now, just keep your posture straight.”

“Posture straight. Got it,” Lydia said.

“To tell Bullet to trot, you’re going to gently squeeze your lower legs, but only for a moment. While you’re doing this, you shorten the reins an inch or two. Ready?”

“I’m ready,” Lydia said.

Lydia shortened the reins as he had instructed. As she worked with the reins, the sound of an explosion echoed throughout the meadow. Bullet let out a loud whinny and his feet sprang into

action. Ben lurched for the reins, but Bullet was too quick. There was nothing Ben could do but watch in horror as Bullet ran, his feet thundering against the ground while Lydia clung to the reins.

# Chapter 18

Lydia clutched the reins as Bullet ran beneath her, the wind whipping in her ears. Her bonnet blew off, and the loose pins in her hair were no match for Bullet's speed, freeing her hair to fly out behind her. *Don't bounce*, Ben had said. Lydia swallowed hard. She could do this. She allowed her body to follow Bullet's motion, trying to keep her body equally balanced. Forward and back, forward and back, like a rocking horse. The effects of the wind made Lydia's eyes water, and Bullet's mane licked at her face. His hooves pounded against the ground in rhythmic movements, sending vibrations rippling through Lydia's body.

It was the most exhilarating—and frightening—thing Lydia had ever experienced. Adrenaline pumped through her, and she felt like a hawk, soaring above the meadow. As Bullet ran, Lydia became more accustomed to the movement of his body, and her rocking with him became more fluid, as if they were melding together into one. Round and around the meadow Bullet went. Lydia caught glimpses of Ben through Bullet's laid back ears, and she could make out the sound of his voice, but she couldn't understand him over the crackling wind.

Eventually, Bullet slowed and came to a stop, as if nothing had happened. Despite no longer being in danger, Lydia still clung to the reins, her arms visibly shaking. Her heart thrummed wildly against her ribs, its pulse beating in her ears.

Ben sprinted over to Lydia and Bullet. "Are you hurt?"

"Hurt?" Lydia let out a laugh. "That was... thrilling!"

Ben cocked his head, as if surprised by Lydia's response. "You were a natural out there. But usually we don't get to galloping until much further into the lessons. I'm so sorry. Bullet doesn't normally spook like that. That blasted explosion!"

"Those explosions are getting more and more frequent," Lydia said. "I guess they've done all they can to find the gold with their picks and shovels. Now they've taken to dynamite."

"And destroying the beautiful nature in the process." Ben shook his head. "Let's get you down."

Ben reached up his arms, motioning with his hand for Lydia. The sputtering of her heart came to an abrupt stop as she realized how close she was about to get to him. She hesitated, then leaned toward him. Her hands gripped tight to the reins, as if they had been forged into one.

"You have to let go," Ben said, his voice gentle and reassuring. "Don't worry. I'll catch you."

"Oh, right," Lydia said, letting out a nervous laugh. It took conscious effort to release each finger from the reins. Then she leaned further toward Ben, half falling into his arms as she dismounted the horse. There was strength in his arms as he steadied her, and his breath warmed her face. His smell was manly and earthy, and Lydia inhaled deeply, savoring being so close to him. For so long after Andrew she had convinced herself that she was fine without a man, fine without a husband, but there, next to Ben, that familiar longing returned, sudden and hard. That longing she once had for Andrew, that desire to be by a certain man's side, to share his life. Only now it was for Ben, this man she hadn't even known existed a month earlier.

Ben's fingers worked their way to the top of Lydia's arms, keeping her steady. His hands were big, much larger than her father's, the type of hands used to physical labor. But in their strength there was a surprising gentleness, too. Lydia's body shook, but she wasn't sure if it was nerves from the ride any more.

"You're shaking," Ben said. "I'm so sorry. I feel so guilty I wasn't able to stop Bullet."

"There's no need," Lydia said. "It wasn't your fault. I can't wait to learn to ride better so I can do that again." The words came tumbling out, without thinking, and Lydia caught her breath, fearful of Ben's response. What was she doing, being so forward like that?

But Ben was smiling, his perfect smile that turned her knees to mush. A breeze blew, blowing Lydia's hair around her face, reminding her that she lost her bonnet somewhere during the ride. What a mess she must be! No wonder Ben was smiling down at her. Not because of teaching her to ride, but because of what a disaster she must look like once again.

"My bonnet!" Lydia said. "Oh, I don't even want to know what I look like right now."

"You look beautiful," Ben said, giving her arms a light squeeze.



*Beautiful.* Ben had called her beautiful. Oh, the men around town told Lydia that she was beautiful all the time in their insincere ploys to convince her to marry them, but there was a sincerity in Ben's tone, a softness that she had never heard. But did he really mean it, or was he just being nice?

"I don't think that's possible," she said.

"Why don't you sit on the stump there, and I'll go find your bonnet," Ben said.

"I can help look," Lydia said.

"Oh no." Ben's tone was insistent. "You're still shaking. And there is no way I can return you home without your bonnet. What would your parents think?"

Lydia's cheeks burned at the thought of facing her parents with her hair disheveled, her bonnet missing. "Alright," she agreed.

Ben helped Lydia over to a nearby tree stump, his hand still firmly gripping her arm. Lydia inched along, savoring the feel of Ben's hand around her. Her body ached, particularly her legs, but it was worth it. Lydia lowered herself onto the stump. Once she was in place, Ben released his fingers from her, taking a tiny piece of her with him.

"I'll be back," Ben said. He hopped onto Bullet and circled the meadow, expertly guiding Bullet to where he wanted him to go, his hand shielding the sun as he searched the ground for her bonnet. Lydia's heart swelled as she watched him. How little she truly knew of him, and yet she longed to be by his side. She wondered what it would be like to have a little home with him, to wake each day next to him, to know that he'd always be there to come home to after the long hours at the cafe.

Ben hopped off his horse and bent down to pick something up. Her bonnet. He waved it in the air. "I found it!"

As Ben returned to her, Lydia tried to stand, surprised to find her knees still so wobbly. Every muscle in her body ached, and her legs were weak. She hated appearing so feeble in front of Ben. If only there was something she could grab for support.

"Don't get up yet," Ben said. He climbed down from Bullet and handed Lydia her bonnet.

Lydia brushed off the dirt, then tied her bonnet on. "There. Now I'm presentable."

"Actually, I liked the way you looked without the bonnet." The corners of Ben's lips turned up in the slightest of grins.

“Oh!” Lydia exclaimed. Was he... flirting with her? Or was he only teasing, being silly because of how dreadful she had to have looked? His eyes examined her face, searching for something. Was it possible that he was feeling the same way she was? How Lydia wished she was better at reading men. But the moment, whatever it was, ended, and Ben turned, gazing across the meadow.

“We’ve been out here a long time,” Ben said. “I don’t want to upset your parents by having you out here too long.”

Lydia sighed. “You’re right.” Ben offered his hand and helped pull Lydia up. Lydia stumbled, bumping into Ben’s chest as she stood. What a klutz she was, and always in front of Ben! “Sorry,” she said.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. You’ve had an exhilarating day.” Ben hesitated, as if there was something he wanted to say but wasn’t sure if he should. Lydia waited, her heart thumping against her ribcage. Ben let go of Lydia. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

# Chapter 19

Ben whistled as he climbed the steps of the Waterman Hotel. His heart was light, lighter than it had been in years. For a brief time he had forgotten about Walter and Moses, forgotten the nightmare that his life had turned into. He had simply lived in the moment, allowed himself to once again feel enjoyment. And it was all because of Lydia. Being with Lydia freed him, freed his heart from the shackles that weighed it down every minute of every day.

Inside the Waterman Hotel, the lobby was full. Men stood around talking. Mrs. Waterman was there, and Samantha, who waved at Ben. Ben decided he wasn't in a rush to get back to the loneliness of his room and introduced himself to a couple of the men.

"Solomon," one of the men said, shaking Ben's hand. "My parents are the owners of this hotel."

"And you?" Ben asked.

"I am but their lowly servant," Solomon said with a chuckle. "But really, if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you." Ben extended his hand to the man next to Solomon.

"Josiah," the other man said. "Welcome to Coyote Pass."

"What do you do here?" Ben asked. "Prospecting?"

"I'm a part-time prospector and a part-time general store clerk," Josiah said.

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Interesting combination. You work in the store to make up for not finding any gold?"

"Oh, Josiah here is one of the most successful prospectors," Solomon said.

"So why work in the store?" Ben asked.

"Gives me something to do besides shoveling dirt all day," Josiah said. There was something more there, Ben could tell. But Ben understood about having to keep secrets, so he didn't press any further.

The three chatted for a bit. Solomon talked about how the town had exploded in growth over the last few months, how they were

busier than ever. Josiah told a few funny stories of different obscure items men had come into the store in search of. Then the conversation turned to women, and both Josiah and Solomon grumbled how few pickings were available.

"Now Samantha over there: she's real perdy," Josiah said to Ben. "But Solomon here won't let me near her. Says he doesn't *trust me*. Can you believe that?"

Ben laughed. "I met Samantha the other day."

Solomon raised his eyebrows. "Did you?"

Ben held up his hands in defense. "She showed me to my room and says hello to me in the lobby. That's it. I swear."

Solomon narrowed his eyes. "That better be it."

"See what I mean?" Josiah said. "Poor girl is never gonna get married."

"Not to a bloke like you," Solomon said with a playful slap to the back of Josiah's head.

"Watch it!" Josiah slapped Solomon back. Then he turned to Ben. "Any lady caught your eye yet?"

Ben pictured Lydia as she clung to Bullet, her dark hair streaming behind her. He pictured her as she sat on the tree stump, her small frame trembling. He pictured her standing before him, her pink lips glistening in the sun, as if they'd been colored by a rose itself. How he'd fought the growing desire to hold her and never let go, to place his lips on hers. A smile stretched across his face; he couldn't help it. Even the very thought of Lydia brought him happiness.

"There is someone!" Josiah said. "See Solomon. You can loosen up about Samantha."

"How do I know it's not Samantha?" Solomon said.

"It's not," Ben said.

"Then who is it?" Solomon asked.

"Oh, well, no one in particular," Ben said.

Solomon and Josiah exchanged glances.

"C'mon, man. You don't have to play coy with us," Josiah said. "Besides, we might be able to tell you if she's a good catch or not."

"Oh, but I'm not, uh, looking to court anyone," Ben said. "I'm, well, I'm too busy making furniture for the Cobble family."

"It's Lydia!" Josiah said.

"Lydia?" Solomon rubbed his chin with his finger and thumb.

"Do you know her?" Ben asked.

“Of course,” Solomon said. “Both our families have been around since practically the beginning. But I don’t know her super well. She’s rather... reserved.”

Ben pictured Lydia squealing and laughing as he helped her off of Bullet. Yes, she was reserved. But she just needed the right person to come along and take the time to get to know her, to peel back those layers of herself that she guarded so tightly.

“Everyone was always interested in her sister,” Josiah said. “But now that Betty is married, the men are starting to pay more attention to Lydia.”

“Look at that grin on his face,” Solomon said. “I think our new friend is more interested in Lydia than making furniture for her family.”

“My relationship with the Cobbles is strictly business,” Ben said.

“Riiiiight,” Solomon and Josiah said in unison.

“It is!” Ben insisted, but he knew he wasn’t fooling either of them.

“She’s a good catch. A smidge boring, perhaps, but still a good catch. She’ll make someone a fine wife,” Josiah said.

“I’m not looking to—”

“And besides,” Josiah continued. “It’s not like we have much choice out West. Beggars can’t be choosers, isn’t that what they say?”

“That’s true, but I’m not looking to get married,” Ben said. *Couldn’t* get married would have been a more accurate word choice, but Ben wasn’t about to explain the details of his situation to Solomon and Josiah, no matter how friendly they seemed. Oh, he wished life were as simple as it was for them, that he could simply meet a nice woman and settle down. But it would never be that way, and he knew Solomon and Josiah would never be able to understand why.

Solomon and Josiah continued discussing the women in town, how depressing the lack of choices was. Then they switched to cards and gambling.

“Care to join us next time we play?” Josiah asked. “We could use another player, now that Jackson is too busy being married.”

Solomon rolled his eyes. “You know why he’s married?”

A shrug rolled over Ben’s shoulders. “Because he fell in love with Betty?”

“No. Because this guy here bet him that if he lost, he had to

court Betty. Jackson didn't even like her back then. And now he's married to her." Solomon poked Josiah with his elbow.

Josiah pounded against his chest. "Yep. They call me the town matchmaker."

"So, you care to join next time?" Solomon asked. "You never know, you might end up with more than a pile of money if you win."

Lydia's face flashed through Ben's mind, but he knew she would never be his. "I doubt that, but I'm in. You just let me know when."

# Chapter 20

Every muscle in her body ached as Lydia worked the following day. Her stomach muscles were cramped, her legs felt as if they were locked in place, and her derrière burned as if the entire thing was bruised. But every pain was worth it; they were proof that the day before had happened, that her time with Ben had been real.

“Aren’t you looking extra lovely today, Miss Lydia.” It was Billy Jones, one of the many young prospectors who’d arrived in the last few months.

Lydia placed a tin bowl of beef stew in front of him. “Here you are, Billy. Enjoy.”

“I always do,” Billy said. “But I’d enjoy it even more if you’d agree to be my wife.”

A wide grin covered Billy’s face, showing off his missing teeth. Even from where she stood, his foul breath assaulted Lydia’s senses, making her cringe. She tried not to put too much emphasis on how others looked, but she couldn’t imagine coming home each night to a man like Billy.

“I’m flattered by the offer, as usual.” Lydia set down another bowl of beef stew in front of Billy’s friend.

“I ordered the cayenne pork chops,” Billy’s friend said.

“Hmm? Oh that’s right. Sorry.” Lydia picked up the bowl. It was the third time that evening that she’d brought out the wrong food. “I’ll be back with some pork chops.”

Lydia carried the bowl of beef stew back to the kitchen. What was wrong with her that evening? Lydia rarely made mistakes. On most days, she remembered whole tables’ worth of orders and never messed up. But on this night, she was off. She was forgetting orders, forgetting to clear plates, forgetting to bring out the water pitcher for refills. Her mind was elsewhere.

“Again?” Betty’s hands flew to her hips. Jackson was there now, having arrived while Lydia was in the dining hall. “This is the fourth time tonight she’s messed up on someone’s order,” she said to her husband.

“Third,” Lydia said.

“Second, third, fourth. Who cares? The point is, something is wrong with you tonight,” Betty said.

“Are you feeling alright?” Jackson asked. “You’re walking funny.”

“I’m fine.” Lydia dumped the beef stew back into the pot on the stove and retrieved a plate of pork chops from her mother. “Little sore after horseback riding yesterday, that’s all.”

“Ever since that horseback riding—*ahem*—lesson, Lydia has been acting all strange,” Betty said.

“I am not,” Lydia said. But she couldn’t help but smile at the thought of Ben helping her off of Bullet, of holding her arms a little too long after, of the patient way he taught her to ride.

“See what I mean?” Betty said. “She’s got it bad.”

“I don’t have anything bad,” Lydia said. “It was just exhilarating to ride a horse. That’s all.”

“It is exhilarating to ride a horse,” Jackson agreed.

“See?” Lydia said.

“You’re no help.” Betty playfully punched Jackson in the arm. Jackson flinched and rubbed his arm, making a pouty face that caused Betty to giggle. Lydia’s heart swelled as she watched her sister and Jackson. She was glad to see her so happy, glad she had found a good man like Jackson to be her husband. But Lydia couldn’t help but feel a teensy bit jealous, too. Having a man like Jackson to go home to every night had to be amazing.

“I do agree, though, that something is off with Lydia if she keeps messing up,” Jackson said.

“That’s better.” Betty blew her husband a kiss. “I’m telling you, it’s this Ben.”

“He did seem nice,” Jackson said.

“I’m not falling for Ben,” Lydia said. “Besides, I don’t hardly know him.”

“He seems sweet. He’s definitely handsome. And he goes to church. What more is there to know?” Betty said.

“His life ambitions. What motivates him. How he plans to provide for a family. What type of home life he had growing up. What—”

“Lydia, Lydia!” Betty interrupted. “All those things come in time. As long as he has the basics, you can find the rest out later. After you get married.”

“Wait. Are you pushing me to get married now, too?” Lydia said.



“The one who resisted our parents’ pressure for so long?”

Betty bobbed her shoulders. “So? I see how wonderful marriage can be. I want the best for my sister.”

“Ladies!” Father’s voice boomed. “Our counter is full of food getting cold. Let’s get moving!”

Betty loaded up her arms with as many tin plates as she could fit. “You’ve got it bad, Lydia,” she said, then disappeared into the dining hall.

Lydia followed not too far behind her, carrying her one plate of pork chops. “No, I don’t,” Lydia whispered, though she knew Betty couldn’t hear. She tried to convince herself that she was only acting strangely because of the excitement over learning to ride, the continued exhilaration over Bullet’s out-of-control gallop. But... could Betty be right? Was she starting to fall for Ben, more than a simple infatuation?

A lump filled Lydia’s throat, making it difficult to swallow. She was falling for Ben. And hard.

# Chapter 21

Ben put the finishing touches on another chair, then stood back to admire his work. It was definitely his best craftsmanship to date. He'd been working from sunup to sundown each day that week, all in the hopes of getting the tables and chairs made as quickly as possible for the Cobble family. He wanted to impress them with both his quality and his efficiency.

"Not bad, hey Bullet?" It got lonely working alone in the woods, and Ben found himself talking more and more to Bullet. "Another one down. Time to start the next one." Ben gathered the wood he would need next, then grabbed his caliper and began to measure.

Ben whistled as he worked, making small notches in the wood with his knife. He tried to focus on his task at hand, but his thoughts kept returning to Lydia, her long, dark hair flowing behind her as she clung to Bullet. He pictured her trembling before him as he helped her down from Bullet, her small body a mixture of strength and fragility. How he had longed to draw her into him, to cradle her in his arms. It hadn't been easy to resist the urge, and an internal battle of desire and will had raged inside him.

But it wasn't right for Lydia. He had to keep a distance between them, to maintain a friendship only, no matter how much she was little by little taking over his heart. One day he would have to leave Coyote Pass, maybe without warning as had happened in the last town. He might end up with a broken heart when that day came, but he couldn't let that happen to Lydia, too.

The sound of cracking twigs and crunching leaves pulled Ben from his thoughts. He cocked his head, listening for the sound. He told himself to calm down, that it was just a deer, like it had been before. The sound continued, growing louder as the deer neared. Ben set down his caliper and knife as quietly as possible. But no—the sound was different this time. Adrenalin rushed through Ben as he realized: this was a human.

Walter. Or Moses. Or both.

He was almost there, whoever it was. There wasn't time to react, so Ben scurried behind a manzanita tree, the closest to him. It didn't

provide much in the form of protection, but it would at least give him a few seconds to assess the situation. He pulled his pistol from his holster. The last thing he wanted was to have to shoot someone, but he was prepared nonetheless.

“Ben?”

It was the voice of a woman, sweet and melodious. Lydia.

Ben laughed, embarrassed, and stepped out of his hiding place.

## Chapter 22

“Ben?”

Lydia cocked her head as Ben came into view. His head was lowered, as if he was embarrassed about something. “Why were you hiding?”

“Oh, well, um...”

And then it hit her. He must have been relieving himself. No wonder he was acting embarrassed: he *was* embarrassed. Of all the times that she could have arrived, it had to be right then. Lydia’s cheeks burned, as if they had been set on fire. Why was she always such a fool in front of him? Tripping and falling onto the dirt, so clumsy in her mounting and dismounting of Bullet. She was a klutz, pure and simple, at least when it came to Ben.

“Oh gosh. I’m so sorry,” Lydia said. “Please don’t answer that.”

This time Ben cocked his head. “So... To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?”

A surprise for him, yes, but Lydia didn’t suppose there could be anything pleasant about her arriving as he was relieving himself. “My father sent me. To check on the progress of the furniture.”

“Your father, huh?”

“Um, ya,” Lydia said, leaving out the part that her father had also told her not to ruin any future marriage proposal that might come with her getting to know Ben better. She’d played it cool, but for once she didn’t mind her father pushing her toward a man, toward Ben. He hadn’t left her thoughts all week, and she had hurried as fast as her still sore legs would carry her to his workstation in the woods.

“I think it’s coming along nicely,” Ben said. “I’ve made five chairs so far this week. This one I finished a few minutes ago.”

Lydia ran her fingers over the smooth back of the chair, once again impressed with Ben’s craftsmanship. “Beautiful,” she said. She glanced at a pile of tools that Ben had spread out on his makeshift worktable. “I wouldn’t even begin to know how to use those.”

“Let’s see. We’ve got a caliper. A gimlet. A bench plane. An axe.”

“I know what an axe is,” Lydia said with a giggle. She picked up

the gimlet. "What is this used for?"

"I use it to drill holes into the wood," Ben explained. "They're designed to not split the wood."

"Ah."

"You wanna try it?"

Lydia hesitated. If she did try, she might end up looking like a fool as she so often did in front of Ben. But then again, maybe her willingness to get her hands dirty and give it a go might impress him. "Alright," she agreed.

Ben picked up the gimlet and a piece of scrap wood. "Now the tip here is a lead screw, used to get the hole going. Then behind that, it's straight and smooth, to clean out the wood. To use it, you're going to first pick your spot. You don't want to be too close to the edge of the wood. After you pick your spot, you turn, turn. Once the lead screw catches, it goes even easier. Then you're going to check the back side of the wood, and when you see it coming through, you turn the wood over and work on the hole from that side." Ben demonstrated how to use the gimlet, his face puckered in concentration, his thick fingers working expertly as they spun the gimlet. In no time, the hole was complete. He held out the gimlet and wood. "Your turn."

Lydia took the items from Ben. He'd made it look so easy, but the gimlet drifted to the side each time Lydia tried.

Ben chuckled. "Here. Let me help you." He moved closer to Lydia, so close that she could feel the heat radiating off his body. Her heart rattled inside her, pitter-pattering against her rib cage. Ben put his fingers around the wood. "I'll hold it steady while you do it."

"Okay," Lydia said. She lined the gimlet up and turned it. With the wood held steady, Lydia had no trouble making her hole.

"You did it!" Ben said.

"Only with your help."

"Doesn't matter. It was your first time. You still did it."

"We make a great team," Lydia said. The words came out without thinking. How flirtatious, how overtly forward. That was something Betty would have said before she was married, not Lydia. Lydia hunched her shoulders.

But Ben's lips crept up into a smile. His hazel eyes searched Lydia's face, making her squirm. He was still standing so close. How easy it would be to turn her body, to lean against his chest and

breathe him in. Lydia's eyes drifted to Ben's heart-shaped birthmark, to his lips that could bring light to the darkest of rooms. For a moment, she allowed herself to long for him to lean down and touch those lips to hers. Her breathing slowed, and a gentle breeze blew around them. Was it possible that Ben felt the way she did, too?

Lydia stepped back, putting space between her and Ben. She had to get a grip, before she embarrassed herself further. There was no way Ben had any feelings for her.

"So," Ben said, his chest raising in a deep inhale. He examined the scrap of wood. "How are you feeling after your ride on Bullet?"

"Every muscle in my body aches," Lydia said. "But it was worth it. It was like flying through the air when Bullet was, um, galloping."

"Now you know what it's like to be a bird."

"That's exactly what I had thought!" Lydia said.

Ben's eyes met with hers, sending her heart frolicking once more. Oh what power he was beginning to exert over her. All it took was a simple glance, a simple smile to send her heart speeding out of control, to turn her knees to goo.

"Only next time, let's work our way up to the gallop," Ben said. "You might be fine, but at least I won't be so frightened."

*Next time.* Lydia liked that there would be a next time, that Ben wanted a next time. How she wished there wasn't always so much work at the cafe, that she could spend her days with Ben, learning to ride.

"That sounds perfect," Lydia said.

"How about Sunday again? After church?"

Excitement percolated throughout Lydia's body. There was a growing need inside her to spend time with Ben, to be near him. If only he had that same feeling for her. Lydia nodded, consciously making an effort to keep her head in a slow, deliberate motion, despite the giddiness that ripped through her. Ben had never given her any indication of motives more than friendship. She couldn't let herself start imagining feelings that didn't exist the way she had with Andrew.

"Great," Ben said. "Sunday it is."

"Hear that Bullet? I get to ride you again."

Ben laughed. "I'm sure he's excited," he said, his tone deeper than normal, as if it wasn't just Bullet whom Ben referred to.

She was imagining it, Lydia told herself. It was all in her imagination. Of course Ben was only referring to Bullet. He couldn't possibly be as excited as she was.

"I better get back." Lydia sighed, remembering all the work that awaited her back at the cafe.

"Oh alright," Ben said. "But let me walk with you back."

Lydia's natural instinct was to protest, to tell him that she would be fine. But she found herself nodding, as if an outside force was pulling her head, up and down, up and down.

"That would be nice," Lydia said.

A few more minutes with Ben would be very nice indeed.

## Chapter 23

“Here’s our fourth right here,” Solomon said as Ben entered the lobby of the Waterman Hotel. He was standing with Josiah and his brother, Ellis. “What do you say? You up to a game of three-card brag?”

Ben was exhausted from the physical labor of making the tables and chairs, but he liked the idea of not sitting in his room, alone with his thoughts of Lydia. He needed to distract himself, to keep from allowing himself to constantly think about her. A game of cards with the fellas would be perfect.

“I’m in,” Ben said.

“You need to go to your room and get some money?” Solomon asked.

Ben clutched his bag, his money kept safe in a pocket inside. He never knew when he might need to flee at a moment’s notice, so he kept his tools, his money, and a few essential belongings with him at all times. “I’m all set.”

“Then let’s go,” Solomon said.

Ben followed the brothers and Josiah outside, down a path into the wooded area a ways behind the Waterman Hotel. After walking for a bit, they arrived at a makeshift table like most in Coyote Pass, a slab of wood over a few crates, barrels for chairs. They each took a seat, and Josiah pulled out a deck of cards from his shirt pocket. As they played, the brothers and Josiah chatted easily with Ben, lighthearted grumbling about the hard work, the cranky hotel guests, and demanding patrons at the general store. Ben enjoyed their company, enjoyed *laughing* once more. A pang of pain twisted at Ben’s heart, reminding him of happier times with his brothers and friends. It pained Ben that these guys could never become his friends either, that he had to enter any new friendship guarded and suspicious. After what happened in the last town, Ben had learned the hard way he couldn’t trust anyone.

But right then, he was going to enjoy the moment. It was the only way he could live his life without going completely crazy.

Ben glanced at his cards, a flush with a queen as the high card.



Not bad, but not great either. Solomon and Ellis folded, but Josiah tossed another coin into the pile.

“How is it that Josiah manages to have better hands twice as much as we do?” Ellis asked his brother.

“I’d say cheating, but I shuffled the cards this round,” Solomon said.

“It’s luck,” Josiah said. “Pure good luck. You in, Ben? Or too nervous that I’m going to win again?”

Ben chuckled. He had won a few rounds so far, but Josiah had beaten all of them by far. “I’m in.”

Josiah displayed his cards. A run.

“Darn,” Ben said.

With a sweep of his arm, Josiah pulled the money toward himself. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

“Ya, ya,” Ellis grumbled. “So. Has anyone seen anyone new in town?”

“There’ve been quite a few new men in the general store this week,” Josiah said.

“Women,” Ellis said. “New *women*.”

“Ellis is upset that those two pretty sisters moved out of the hotel,” Solomon said.

“They did?” Josiah asked. “Dang.”

“The only new women checking in are married,” Ellis grumbled.

“I did see a couple new women coming out of Canyon Lodge the other day.” Josiah shuffled the cards and passed them out. “Don’t know if they’re married or not, though.”

Ben picked up his cards. Three tens—a prial. There were only five hands that could beat his. And what were the odds of that? Math had never been a strong subject for Ben, but he doubted it was high. The blood rushed through him in a flurry of excitement, but Ben kept his face solemn.

“What about you, Ben?” Ellis asked. He tossed a couple coins into the center of the table. “Any women catch your eye yet? And don’t say Samantha.”

“Oh, well...” Ben placed his wager in the middle.

“There’s one who’s caught his fancy,” Josiah said. “Lydia Cobble.”

“Lydia Cobble?” Ellis frowned.

Ben chuckled. “What’s wrong with Lydia?”

Ellis shrugged. “Nothing, if you like the boring type.”

“And what makes her boring?” Ben asked.

“She won’t go to any of the dances,” Josiah said.

Back home, Ben did go to the occasional barn dance, dragged there by his brothers, but it had never been something he overly enjoyed. The fact that Lydia didn’t like to go, either, only endeared her to him more.

“And she always has her nose stuck in a book,” Ellis said.

Ben remembered the first time he met Lydia. She wasn’t paying attention, her focus on the book in her hands. If it wasn’t for her love of books, they never would have met.

“I mean, it’s not like this town is getting a plethora of book deliveries. She’s got to be reading the same thing over and over.” Ellis pretended to yawn. “Boring.”

No, the town wouldn’t be getting many new books, Ben realized. Wouldn’t Lydia love it if he could find something new for her to read?

“She’s a nice girl.” Josiah tossed in a small gold nugget. “A little dull, that’s all.”

Boring. A little dull. None of Ben’s new friends had taken the time to get to know Lydia, to see the deeper side of her that Ben was only beginning to see. This made him glad, though he chastised himself for the feeling. He shouldn’t be glad; he shouldn’t care whether his friends were interested in her or not. He could never have Lydia, could never make her his wife. In fact, he should wish that one of his friends was interested in Lydia, to know that she would be taken care of by someone nice.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t wish such a thing.

“I remind you, I’m not looking to get married.” Ben tossed in enough money to match Josiah’s gold nugget. “I’m not planning on courting anyone.”

“I fold,” Ellis said.

“Me, too,” Solomon said.

Josiah tossed in another nugget, eyeing Ben. “You still in?”

Ben made a show of examining his cards, scrunching his face in pretend concern. “I don’t know. This is getting awfully rich for me.”

“Who does Ben remind you of?” Josiah asked.

“Jackson,” Solomon and Ellis answered in unison.

“Jackson?” Ben asked.

“Yep,” Josiah said. “Remember how I told you that he had to

court Betty because he lost a bet to me?”

“And what does that have to do with me?” Ben asked.

“Well, you’re in the same predicament,” Josiah said. “So tell you what. I’ll make you the same bet. You don’t have to put in any more money. But if I win, you have to court Lydia for a month.”

“Hmm. I don’t know...” There was almost no way that Josiah could beat Ben, but he wasn’t going to let on.

“Do it,” Ellis said.

“Look how happy Jackson is,” Josiah said. “Trust me. You’ll thank me for it later.”

“Well. Alright,” Ben said.

Josiah set down his cards, one by one. An Ace. A two. A three. All the same suit. A running flush, the highest running flush you could have in three-card brag.

But it wasn’t as high as a prial. Ben flipped over his cards. The smile on Josiah’s face evaporated; his jaw dropped. Solomon and Ellis roared in laughter.

“He had you fooled!” Ellis said.

“No one beats the big-wager king,” Solomon said.

“Not any more.” Ben pulled the coins and gold nuggets to him, much more money than he had started the night with.

“Man, did he get you or what?” Ellis said, slapping Josiah on the back.

“Ya, ya,” Josiah said. “Nice job, Ben.”

“You’re alright, Ben,” Ellis said. “You can join us any time.”

“It’s too bad you won, though,” Josiah said. “You would’ve thanked me for losing when you saw how happy you were with Lydia.”

“Like I said, I’m not courting anyone,” Ben said. An ache filled his heart as he voiced the words. But the image of Walter and Moses, guns drawn, flashed through his mind, and Ben knew he had no choice. His new friends would never be able to understand, but Ben had to remain resolute.

He would never be able to court Lydia, no matter how much his heart longed to.

# Chapter 24

Lydia stood on the mounting block and, with Ben's help, climbed onto Bullet. She settled into the saddle, trying to remember all the instructions Ben had given her last time. Straight line from shoulder to hip to ankle. Sit in such a way that if the horse disappeared from beneath her, she would land in a standing position. Arms soft and bent. Hands right in front of her body. Check, check, check, at least Lydia hoped.

"You're doing great." Ben jumped onto the mounting block, then grabbed Lydia's arm, shaking it gently. "Soft arms. Relax. You don't want Bullet to feel your tension."

Lydia tried to relax, but how could she while Ben was touching her? With his fingers around her arm, Lydia was anything but relaxed.

"Relax," Ben said again, laughing.

Lydia gulped down a steady breath. She could do this. She forced herself to relax, to let the tension of her body slip away, even with Ben's hand on her.

"Close enough," Ben said. "Now, do you remember how to tell Bullet it's time to walk?"

"I think so." Lydia pulled lightly on the reins, squeezing her calves at the same time. "Let's go, boy." Lydia made the kissy sound as well, her cheeks immediately burning, as if Ben could see her thoughts. Bullet took a step forward and began to walk at a slow pace.

Thankfully, Ben didn't seem to notice her embarrassment. "Perfect. Let's do this for a while. We'll get you accustomed to the saddle again, practice your balance, and get Bullet used to his new rider."

For a few minutes, they circled the meadow without talking. The sun was warm as the official start of summer neared, but it was still pleasant, especially with the light breeze that blew around them. Bullet's feet let out a rhythmic clip clop beneath Lydia. Above, a hawk soared, letting out long screeches as it searched for its prey. Lydia matched her body to Bullet's movements, rocking back and

forth in step with him.

"You're doing great," Ben said after a while.

"That's because I have such a fantastic teacher," Lydia said. She bit her lip, not believing the way words like that came tumbling out of her around Ben. She wasn't a natural flirt, not the way her sister had been before she married, always batting her lashes and swinging around her hips. Lydia's words came from a place of sincerity, a place deep in her heart. She glanced down at Ben, fearful for his reaction, but he was smiling, a genuine smile that relaxed her.

"And you are a fantastic student," Ben said. He cleared his throat. "So. Tell me more about you."

"About me?" A slight panic swept through Lydia. There wasn't much to her, wasn't much to say. She worried she'd bore Ben, someone who grew up going on cattle drives and riding horses. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," Ben said. "I mean, whatever you want to tell me."

"There's not much to tell," Lydia said. "I come from Philadelphia, and I live with my parents. And I have a younger sister named Betty who just got married—"

"I know all that, silly," Ben said. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Like what?" Lydia asked. Men flirted with her at the cafe, but none of them truly wanted to get to know her. Lydia had longed for that, longed for someone who would invest the time to know her thoughts and dreams. And now that the moment had arrived, she had no idea what to say.

"Well, if you could make a wish on a star, what would you wish for?" Ben asked.

A few weeks ago, Lydia would have answered, *Andrew*. She would have answered that she wished to turn back the hand of time, to be back in Philadelphia, to change her father's mind about coming out West, to secure Andrew before he married her former best friend. But now that Ben had entered into her life, everything had shifted. She didn't miss Andrew so much; she didn't mind being in Coyote Pass so much. Ben had brought hope back into her life.

Ben would be her new wish.

But she couldn't dare tell him that.

"I'd wish... I'd wish for better food options, so that we didn't have to serve beef stew every night," Lydia said, spewing out the

first thing that came to mind. She shook her head. What a stupid thing to say.

Ben chuckled. "But your beef stew is delicious."

"It is, but it stops being quite as tasty when you've had it fourteen thousand times."

"Fourteen thousand, huh?"

"Fourteen or fifteen. Once you hit ten thousand, it's hard to keep track."

"That's a lot of beef stew," Ben said.

"Yes it is." Lydia hesitated. "What about you? What would your wish be?"

"My wish?" Ben rubbed his chin, his index finger covering his heart-shaped birthmark. A faraway look crossed his face, as if his mind had transported him somewhere else, somewhere far from Coyote Pass. "My wish would be for a home, with a lot of land so Bullet could run."

"Maybe you could build yourself one here." Lydia realized she had no idea how long Ben planned to stay in Coyote Pass, what his future plans were. She assumed he was here to stay, but maybe he wasn't. Her heart thudded inside her, half nervous and half anxious for Ben's answer.

"Hmm," Ben said, the faraway look crossing his face once more.

*Hmm.* What kind of answer was that? What did it mean? Lydia wished she could read Ben, wished she knew what secrets lay behind his hazel eyes.

"Let's talk favorites," Ben said, snapping back to his normal self.

"Favorites?"

"Ya. Rapid fire style. Favorite color?"

"Red," Lydia said.

"Red? Interesting."

"Why is that interesting?"

"Most women like more feminine colors. Like pink or purple or yellow."

"I'm not like most women," Lydia said.

"No. No, you're not." Ben's tone dropped, his voice sultry, making Lydia's skin prickle with goosebumps. "Favorite animal?"

"Horses!" Lydia said, giving Bullet a quick rub on his neck.

"Mine too! Let's see... favorite childhood memory?"

"Favorite childhood memory?" Lydia repeated, thinking. Most of her favorite memories were her family visits with Andrew and his

family, but she'd forced those from her mind long ago. It hurt too much to dwell on them, to remember everything she'd had to leave behind. "I'd say walks with my family, when my father would take Betty and I by Independence Hall. He'd tell us about all the amazing men who so passionately fought for liberty, how brave they were to declare us a nation."

"What an amazing thing to be able to see," Ben said.

Lydia nodded. She could still picture Independence Hall, looming before her so tall and proud. "Even though we passed by it semi-frequently, Father never wanted us to take it for granted. He wanted to instill in us an appreciation for what our forefathers did for us... So what's yours?"

"Mine?"

"Ya. Your favorite childhood memory."

"My first cattle drive," Ben said. "Being out in the wilderness. Spending all day on my horse. Nights laughing around a campfire with my father, brothers, and a few other rancher friends. Sleeping under a blanket of stars."

"Did you ever get lonely out there?" Lydia asked.

"Sometimes," Ben said. "I missed my mother and sisters and friends back home. But I had my father and brothers and a few other ranchers. And Waddle of course."

"Waddle?"

"My horse when I was younger, before I had Bullet. He wasn't very steady when he was a foal, so my little sister started calling him Waddle. It stuck."

"I think it's cute," Lydia said. "And who named Bullet?"

"I did." Ben thrust out his chest. "That's a manly horse name right there."

Lydia giggled. "Yes it is."

They circled the meadow, Lydia on Bullet and Ben walking alongside her. The more they talked, the more relaxed Lydia grew, the more comfortable around Ben she felt. Once she was able to set her nerves to the side, Ben was easy to talk to. She liked that he asked her questions, liked that he wanted to know who she was on the inside. An hour passed by without Lydia's notice, and then another. She knew her body was going to be sore again the next day, but Lydia didn't care. It was worth it, one-hundred percent.

"Alright, let's see," Ben said. "We've covered a lot today, but I don't think we've done dessert. What's your favorite?"

Lydia's mouth began to water as she thought of the chocolate cake that her grandmother made. "This chocolate cake my grandmother would bake for me whenever we visited. She'd put melted chocolate on the top. Delicious."

"Yum. Now I want some."

"Me too," Lydia said. "So what's yours?"

"My favorite? Definitely shortbread. My mother used to make the best. I haven't had any in... well, in ages."

"Shortbread?" The wheels in Lydia's mind spun, thinking of the shortbread Sarah made.

"Yep. But don't think I'll be getting any of that out here any time soon," Ben said.

"Probably not." Lydia worked to contain a smile. She'd have to get some for Ben, surprise him with it. A thank you for teaching her to ride Bullet.

"We've been out here a while. I better get you back home." Ben let out a long sigh. Was it possible he was as disappointed as she was to end their lesson?

"You're probably right," Lydia said.

"Why don't you ride Bullet home this time?" Ben said.

A silence fell between them as they headed down the path back to town. Ben's face had turned serious and focused, and Lydia wondered what he was thinking. Each time she was with him she got to know him a bit better, but there was still so much about him that was mysterious. He only talked about his past in bits and pieces, and usually from his younger years. She still had no idea why he left home, what had brought him to Coyote Pass. But then, there was plenty of time to learn that.

"We're almost there," Lydia said, trying to hide the disappointment from her tone as her home came into view.

"Do you remember how to make Bullet stop?"

"I think so. Tighten knees and thighs. Tighten grip on reins and hold in place. Then apply pressure with your legs and pull the reins toward me."

"Perfect," Ben said. "Now, let's see it."

"Whoa, boy," Lydia said. Bullet took a few more steps, then stopped.

"You're getting better every time," Ben said. "There's no mounting block here, so I'm going to have to help you down again."



Lydia leaned to the side, her body tingling with nerves once more. Ben wrapped his hands around her waist as he guided her down. He didn't move back as Lydia's feet hit the ground, didn't loosen his grip around her. He gazed down at her, his eyes searching her face, as if they were trying to tell her something that he couldn't bring himself to say. His eyes drifted to her lips, and he tipped his head down, ever slightly. Was he going to kiss her? Lydia's body froze, but inside she shook with a strange cocktail of fear and excitement.

But then the moment was over before it had even begun. Ben stepped back, shaking his head. He smiled, but it was a forced smile, strained. There was something there, something he wasn't ready to tell her.

But Lydia wouldn't push it. She could wait, whatever it was. She would wait forever for him.

## Chapter 25

Ben waved as Lydia disappeared inside her home. He had promised himself he wouldn't let his feelings get involved, would only enjoy time with her as a friend. But each time they said goodbye, she took a piece of his heart, then another. He wasn't going to be a whole man when the time came for him to leave Coyote Pass.

Ben hopped onto Bullet and guided him toward Main Street. His heart still frolicked rapidly. How close he had come to kissing Lydia. How hard he had fought the internal battle that had raged in his mind! Her lips had been so near to his, like a ripe fruit ready to be plucked from the branch. The desire to lean down and feel those lips on his had burned inside him like a wildfire devouring everything in its path, but somehow he had mustered the strength to pull himself back. He couldn't let himself kiss her, ever. It wasn't fair to him, but more importantly, it wasn't fair to Lydia.

They were friends and nothing more. That was all they could ever be.

Ben arrived at the edge of Main Street and passed by Cobble Cafe, closed up for the Cobbles' day of rest. Main Street was busy, full of horses pulling cars and wagons, men on horseback. Off key singing spewed out of Golden Palace Saloon, and men with bottles gathered out front. A few ladies exited Canyon Lodge, leaning in to each other and laughing. Ben spotted Samantha with a friend. She waved. Ben nodded his head, but he didn't stop.

Up ahead, Ben noticed a group of people surrounding a wagon. He guided Bullet over to the group and hopped off.

"You here to buy something? You have plenty of money after the other night."

Ben turned to find Josiah at his side.

"Is it a merchant?" Ben asked.

"With goods from exotic lands." Josiah rolled his eyes. "Or at least that's what they always claim."

A merchant. Ben thought of Lydia's love of reading, how hard it was to get a new book in a town like Coyote Pass. Maybe the merchant had a few books to sell.

“Might as well see what he’s got,” Ben said.

Ben chatted with Josiah as they waited their turn. As the crowd around the merchant grew, men shoved against each other, knocking into Ben several times. A fistfight broke out to the side.

“Welcome to the West, huh?” Josiah said.

Ben chuckled. “Apparently you lose a part of your civility when you cross the California state line.”

“Where is the California state line anyway?” Josiah asked.

Ben shrugged. “Beats me.”

“One at a time, one at a time,” the merchant called out as Ben and Josiah neared him. When it was Ben’s turn, he said, “Step right up. I’ve got a pillow here, most comfortable pillow you’ll find this side of the Mississippi. Only one dollar. That’s right, one dollar for the best night of sleep you’ll ever have.”

“I’m not looking for a pillow.” Ben eyed the supplies that he could see in the merchant’s wagon. Lamps, a keg of horseshoes, cartons of eggs, a pile of men’s shirts. “Do you have any books?”

Josiah burst into a laugh. “I didn’t fancy you for the reading type.”

The merchant pulled on the gray hairs of his beard. “A book you say? Believe I still got a few of those.” He rifled through his items and pulled out a worn-looking book, red with a rifle on its cover. “Here we go. All about weapons and war. Something a strapping young man like you will love. Tell you what. I’ll cut you a deal. Fifty cents.”

“Not the type of book I’m looking for,” Ben said. “Do you have anything a lady might like to read?”

“Book for a lady, huh?” the merchant said. Then he snapped his fingers. “By golly, I believe I have just the thing you’d be looking for. The type of book any special lady would love.” The merchant turned and rummaged through his items.

Josiah raised his eyebrows. “A lady, huh? Mr. I’m-not-planning-on-courting-anyone.”

“I’m not,” Ben said.

“This wouldn’t be for Lydia now, would it?”

“Perhaps. But only as a token of appreciation. For all the business her family is giving me.”

“Of course,” Josiah said. “Men buy the pretty daughters of their customers tokens of appreciation all the time.”

“Well...” Ben’s voice trailed off.

“Here we are!” The merchant pulled a book out with a beautiful brown cover full of flowers and a single butterfly in the middle. A gold-colored plate was attached to the top with the words *Jane Eyre*. At the bottom of the cover were the words *Household Edition*. “I’m told this book is quite good, loved by all the ladies.”

Ben took the book from the merchant and flipped through the pages. He wasn’t much of a reader himself, but if this was what Lydia enjoyed, he wanted to get it for her. “I’ll take it.”

“That will be three dollars,” the merchant said.

Three dollars? Ben blinked in surprise. He expected the merchant to jack up his prices, and he couldn’t blame him. When you had the goods that no one else could get, you got to set the prices. But *three dollars*? Well, Lydia was worth every penny of it. Ben dug around in his bag for the money.

“Three dollars?” Josiah said. “You must really care for her.”

“Three dollars is nothing after all the money I won the other night,” Ben said as he passed his coins to the merchant.

“Touché,” Josiah said.

Ben turned the book over in his hand, wondering when the right moment to give it to Lydia would be. Should he swing by unannounced at the cafe? Wait to see if she stopped by his workstation in the woods to check on the progress? Give it to her on Sunday after church? His heart turned into a pattering mess as Ben thought of seeing her again. He pictured her face lighting up as he handed her the book, the way she might lovingly look at him with those dark, mysterious eyes.

It was only a token of friendship, Ben reminded himself. Only a thank you for their business, for welcoming him to town.

“Just friends, right Ben?” Josiah asked, as if he had been reading Ben’s mind.

“Correct,” Ben said.

But he knew he wasn’t fooling anyone. Least of all himself.

# Chapter 26

Lydia chopped the vegetables for the evening stew as fast as she could, almost slicing her fingers twice. She wanted to swing by and see Sarah, to talk to her about buying some shortbread for Ben. She had seen Sarah that morning when she delivered her cakes, but someone else had always been around, and Lydia didn't want to ask her in front of them.

"Wow, I don't think I've ever seen you work that fast," Betty said with a giggle. "You off to see a certain special someone this afternoon?"

"There is no special someone," Lydia said. "But I would like to go visit Sarah."

"You're right," Betty said. "No one special. Handsome men are always giving horseback riding lessons to ladies they have no attraction to."

"Ben and I are friends. That's it."

"Mm-hmm," Betty said, her tone unconvinced.

Lydia's thoughts drifted to the other day as he accompanied her back to her home. He'd gazed down on her with such longing in his eyes, so much so that for a moment Lydia had wondered if he might kiss her. But the moment had ended so abruptly. Though less intense, there were moments like that often with him, times when his eyes were filled with affection, and then times when he seemed to have zero romantic interest whatsoever. Lydia wished she knew what he felt. If he only wanted to be her friend, then fine, she would accept that and go on. But if there was the possibility he wanted something more...

Lydia finished her pile of carrots and tossed them in a big bowl. "Is it alright if I go down and visit Sarah?"

"Go ahead," Mother said.

Lydia pulled off her apron, then fastened her bonnet in place. "I won't be long."

"I should hope not," Mother said with a grin.

Lydia scurried down Main Street, ignoring the calls of the men as she passed them by. The blacksmith shop soon came into view,

and the clang of Calvin's hammer hitting the anvil rang in her ears. Smoke billowed out of the open windows. Calvin was in deep concentration, but Jackson looked up and waved. Lydia waved back, then continued toward the back of the blacksmith shop, where Sarah had her kitchen.

"This is a nice surprise," Sarah said. She opened the oven and pulled out a tray of cinnamon cookies.

The scent of the cookies tickled Lydia's nose, making her mouth water. "Those smell delicious."

"You're welcome to have one when they cool," Sarah said.

"Oh no," Lydia said. "I know you need them for your deliveries."

"I always make extra for Calvin and Jackson," Sarah said. "You can have one of theirs."

"In that case, then sure!"

"Did you get your afternoon prep done early today?" Sarah asked.

"I did." Lydia's eyes darted around the table, full of cookies, breads, and cakes. Sarah's baking business had grown exponentially in the time since her arrival. "You're running out of room. You're going to need a bigger place soon."

"That's what Calvin says," Sarah said. "He thinks I should open my own shop. Maybe even hire some help."

"That would be fantastic," Lydia said. "And I know just the man who can build the furniture you need for it."

Sarah laughed. "I'm not there quite yet. Besides, I'm not sure it's something I want to do."

"And why not?"

"I like being here. Having Calvin close."

But Lydia knew her friend. Although Calvin had given Sarah a boost to her confidence, made her see her own self-worth, there were still little doubts that lingered in Sarah's mind, even though she tried to hide them. "I can't imagine it would be anything other than a success. And you could have so much more room. Get another stove or two. Maybe even set up a few tables where people could eat the desserts. Just don't start cooking other foods. I don't want you to put our cafe out of business!"

Sarah giggled. "Of course not! Friends don't do that to each other."

They chatted a bit more, imagining how Sarah's shop would be

set up, what other types of goodies and sweets she could sell. The time passed quickly, too quickly, as it always did whenever Lydia wasn't working. She would need to get back to work soon, and she still hadn't asked Sarah for the shortbread.

"It's about time for me to get back." Lydia hesitated. Why was she nervous to ask Sarah about the shortbread? "So, I was wondering... Would you mind making a batch of shortbread with tomorrow's order?"

"You don't normally serve shortbread," Sarah said. "But of course I can make you some. Only one batch though?"

"We're, um, not serving shortbread. It's just for me."

Sarah cocked her head. "You want a whole batch of shortbread just for yourself?"

"Well..." Lydia felt her cheeks burn, and she knew they were as bright as a glittering ruby. "They're for Ben, actually. I found out shortbread is his favorite dessert."

A smile swung free across Sarah's face. "For Ben, huh?"

"Ya." Ben's handsome face flashed through Lydia's mind.

"I'd be happy to make some shortbread for him," Sarah said. "I mean, for you to give him."

"You don't... think it's too forward of a thing for me to do, do you?" Lydia asked.

"Giving shortbread to a friend to thank him for horseback riding lessons?" Sarah said. "Not too forward at all."

Lydia bobbed her head in short, clipped nods. A thank you to a friend for horseback riding lessons. That's all this was, nothing more.

"Of course, if this leads to something else, don't blame me," Sarah said.

Lydia's cheeks burned once again, but she didn't answer, too afraid to voice her thoughts aloud. Too afraid to admit that yes, she hoped the shortbread did indeed lead to something else.

## Chapter 27

Ben's stomach growled as he attached the pedestal base into the table top. Another table complete. Ben stood back to check for any design flaws, but he didn't see any. It was work to be proud of, work that the Cobbles were sure to enjoy. Ben threw a tarp over the table, then decided he needed to eat. It was already halfway through the afternoon, and he hadn't eaten anything other than a banana for breakfast.

Ben rummaged through his bag, but he was out of food. "Guess we're going to the general store," he said to Bullet as he hopped on his horse.

As Ben neared the main section of town, his eye caught sight of a familiar figure exiting the back of the blacksmith shop. Lydia. His heart snagged a few extra beats, thumping against his ribcage. He had the book in his backpack; maybe now would be a good time to give it to her. Ben watched as Lydia adjusted her bonnet, the sun shining on her face, making it glow like an angel. There was an innocence in her soft features, in the gentle curve of her nose and delicate line of her lips.

If only his life was different. If only the constant threat of Walter and Moses showing up, guns blazing, wasn't real. Then Ben could have a normal life, a lovely wife to come home to each night. A lovely wife like Lydia. Ben imagined waking up next to Lydia, her dark hair down and loose, swept across her rosy cheek, his heart nearly bursting with love and happiness. How good life would be with a woman like Lydia by his side.

But it could never be.

Even so, he couldn't resist going and talking to her, enjoying her company if only for a few minutes. It was as if she was a magnet, pulling him to her, a powerful force he was too weak to resist. He guided Bullet over to Lydia, then hopped off.

"Why hello there," Ben said.

Lydia jumped, almost tripping as she spun around to see who had come up behind her. She was clumsier than any woman Ben had ever met, but he found it endearing. "Oh, hi!" she said. Her



eyes widened, as if she had just gotten caught stealing a piece of candy.

"I didn't imagine I'd find you out and about," Ben said. "What are you up to?"

"Oh, um..." She looked almost frightened, like a child who'd snuck out. "I was, uh, just visiting Sarah."

Ben looped his arms across his chest. "Just visiting Sarah, huh?"

"Yes. That's all. Just a quick visit hello." Lydia glanced down, unable to meet his eyes. Ben couldn't imagine why she was being so secretive about visiting a friend. She was hard to read sometimes, hard to understand. And it only drew Ben to her more, made him want to discover why she was the way she was, what made her tick.

"And how is Sarah?" Ben asked.

Lydia glanced up. "Sarah? Oh, um, she's fine."

"Glad to hear. And how are *you*?"

"Me? Oh, I'm good too." The corners of Lydia's mouth crept up into a small smile. Finally. "And how are you?"

"Dandy," Ben said.

"Dandy?" Lydia giggled. Ben loved hearing her giggle, loved the melodic sound it produced, loved the way it made her eyes light up.

"Yep." Ben thrust out his chest. "Doin' dandy."

They stood for a moment, neither saying anything. Ben thought of the book in his bag. It was the perfect opportunity to give it to her. It was a token of his appreciation for her, a way of caring for her even though he knew he'd one day have to leave her. All he had to do was pull it out, hand it over. But doubts filled his mind. What if she took the book to mean something more than a gift of friendship? What if she took it to mean some sort of declaration of feelings?

Because the truth was, she wouldn't be wrong to interrupt his gesture that way.

Maybe he shouldn't have bought the book. The last thing he wanted to do was to break her heart, even if his own was going to end up broken.

"I finished another table," Ben said.

"That's wonderful." Lydia's eyes searched his face, as if she was trying to read him, as if she was as confused about his feelings as he was. Oh, there was so much unsaid between them; Ben could feel it

deep down to the core of his bones. If only he could be honest with her; if only he could unburden his heart, express his true feelings.

But he couldn't. He had to protect her.

"I was just, uh, heading to the general store," Ben said. "Then I'll start back to work again."

"And I'm heading back to work myself," Lydia said.

"That's across from the general store. Why don't I walk with you?"

Lydia gazed into Ben's eyes. Oh, those beautiful dark eyes, as if they were cut from jasper. "That would be nice."

They chatted easily as they headed down Main Street, Bullet following behind them. The street was bustling, filled with horses, carts, and wagons, but Ben hardly noticed. The only thing that mattered right then were those cherished minutes with Lydia, too fleeting and too far in between. Soon Cobble Cafe came into view, and once again Ben would have to say goodbye to Lydia.

Leaving her was becoming harder and harder. Ben didn't want to think about the day he would have to leave her forever.

"Thank you for walking with me." Lydia hesitated, as if she was longing for a goodbye kiss as much as Ben was.

Ben watched as her thin figure disappeared inside her family cafe. His lungs flattened as he hissed out a long sigh. Ben turned to Bullet and patted him on the nose. "At least I have you, boy. Leaving's not going to be easy when the time comes."

# Chapter 28

“Here we are, gentlemen.” Lydia set down four steaming plates of eggs and fried potatoes. “Anything else I can get for you?”

“Only your hand in marriage,” one of the diners said. He flashed a smile, showing off two rows of brown and missing teeth.

Lydia grimaced. She had always told herself she wouldn’t be like Betty was before Jackson, wouldn’t put so much emphasis on a man’s appearance. It was what was inside that counted. Still, she couldn’t get past the teeth, the dirt that seemed to permeate his skin, the long unkempt hair. “I appreciate the offer, but we only serve food and beverages here.” Lydia pasted a smile on her face. Betty had been so much better at turning down the droves of marriage proposals she’d received.

“Alright,” the man grumbled. His buddies around him chuckled.

Lydia gathered a few empty plates from a nearby table, then returned to the kitchen. The morning rush was over, most men already headed off to the river and mines before the sun became too scorching. Only a few stragglers remained. As Lydia dumped the tin plates into the wash bin, Sarah entered the kitchen, her basket overflowing with cakes they sliced and sold.

“Good morning.” Sarah began to unload the cakes onto the counter. “I threw in a few extra cookies for you this morning. I thought you could use a little treat for yourselves.”

“Thank you, Sarah,” Father said. “That’s mighty kind of you.”

“It’s not always easy to cut those cakes and not eat them for myself,” Mother said.

Sarah finished unloading her basket, then came along Lydia’s side. She held up a bag. “The shortbread cookies are in here,” she whispered.

“Thank you,” Lydia said.

“Let me know how it goes.”

“Goes?”

“When you give them to Ben.”

A zip of excitement and nerves rushed through Lydia. “They’re only a thank you gift, remember?”

"If that's what you say," Sarah said. "I have a lot of deliveries to get to. But I expect a full report later."

Lydia hunched her head down, but she couldn't conceal a smile. Just thinking about Ben made her giddy inside, like a little girl excited for Christmas. After Sarah left, Lydia glanced around the kitchen, searching for a place she could hide her stash until she was able to take it to Ben. She settled on a spot on a shelf, behind a canister that wasn't used too often.

"What was that all about?" Betty asked, sneaking up behind Lydia.

Lydia jumped. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed her sister. "Oh!"

Betty grabbed the bag, then opened it. "Is this shortbread? Why are you hiding shortbread?"

"I, uh, really like shortbread." Lydia rubbed her belly. "Yummy."

Betty raised her eyebrow and gave Lydia *the look*. "Riiight. Truth. Who are they for?"

"For me," Lydia said.

Betty folded her arms across her chest. "For you? Or for you to give to Ben?"

"Maybe."

"Don't lie to me." Betty pursed her lips, scrunching her nose as she did.

"Oh fine," Lydia said. "Yes, they're for Ben."

Betty jumped up and down, squealing. Lydia glanced at her parents, who were working at the stove, their backs to her and her sister. Lydia held her index finger to her lips. "Shh!"

"I'm so proud of you," Betty said. "This is something I would have done."

"It's just a thank you for the horseback riding lessons." Lydia bit her lip. "You don't think it's too forward, do you?"

"Forward! Not at all!" Betty said.

"Girls!" Father whirled around. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Betty and Lydia said in unison.

Father's eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. "It's been a little while since you've checked on the tables."

"Yes, Father," Betty said.

The rest of the morning dragged by. Lydia's thoughts kept returning to Ben. She would need to see him that day, while the

shortbread was still fresh. But what would she say? A lump filled her throat as she tried to formulate something that sounded nice. *Hi! I have shortbread for you. Thank you for the riding lessons. Or, I asked Sarah to make you some shortbread as a thank you for your time in teaching me to ride.* It all sounded so hokey, so stiff. Lydia discharged a grunted breath. She wished she was better at this. Better at flirting, better at being around men, better at finding the right thing to say. Her sister had gotten all the skills in that area, and Lydia had been given none. It wasn't fair.

The midday dinner came and went, and prep for the evening supper began. As she had the previous day, Lydia sped through her chores. But as she worked, her nerves began to take over. Could she do this? Could she really just show up and give Ben the shortbread? What if *he* found the gesture too forward? Oh what was she thinking, that Ben could even possibly have any interest in her? Maybe she shouldn't go. Maybe she should just eat the shortbread herself and forget she'd ever come up with such an idea.

But Betty wasn't about to let her sister not go. "Father, don't you think Lydia ought to check on how the furniture is coming along? She's about done with her prep, and I can finish the rest."

Father glanced up from the meat he was preparing. "I think that would be a fabulous idea."

"Oh, I, um, don't think—" Lydia began.

"What's wrong with you?" Betty whispered. "Did you forget you had shortbread specially made for him?"

"Shh," Lydia hissed.

"I agree. I think it's a wonderful idea for Lydia to stop by and see Ben," Mother said.

Betty cocked her head at Lydia. "I really don't understand."

Of course Betty would never understand. Betty had all the right words and all the right moves. She'd never confused mere friendship with a man for true love.

"Lydia, you're going," Father said, his tone final.

Lydia swallowed. No one said no to Father when he put his foot down. She was going to see Ben, going to deliver the shortbread.

"Alright." Lydia removed her apron and hung it on a hook. "If you insist."

# Chapter 29

“Hello, Ben.”

Ben glanced up, startled to see Lydia standing in his work area, only a few feet away. Over the noise of his saw, he hadn’t heard her arrive. A rush of emotions zipped through his body, and he was filled with a longing to take her in his arms, to know what it felt like to hold her. A wisp of brown hair fell from her bonnet, brushing against her cheek, and Ben fought the urge to reach out and tuck it behind her ear. Lydia shifted from foot to foot, as if she was nervous about something, her fingers toying with a small bag she was carrying.

“Why hello,” Ben said.

“Father wanted me to, um... Well the furniture... Um, Father thinks I should check on it. I mean...” Lydia stammered out the words, as if the right word stuck to her tongue, unable to be spoken. Then she thrust out her hand. “I got you this.”

“What is it?” Ben took the bag from Lydia and examined it. The word *sugar* was written on it in fading black letters. “You got me sugar?”

Lydia giggled, her tense body relaxing a tiny bit. “It’s not sugar.”

“Well?”

“Open it and see.”

Ben opened the bag, and a sweet smell immediately greeted his nose. “Is this... shortbread?” Ben pulled out a piece and popped it into his mouth. He closed his eyes as he chewed, his spirit traveling for a moment to his boyhood kitchen, his mother by his side as he devoured one of her pieces of shortbread. Ben opened his eyes. Lydia was watching him, her face twisted in worry. “This is delicious!”

Lydia’s face muscles loosened. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? I love it!” Ben exclaimed. “How did you ever find shortbread in a little town like Coyote Pass?”

“Sarah makes it,” Lydia said. “I, um, asked her to make you some since you said it was your favorite.”

Ben's heart swelled. He was falling for her, fast and hard; his feelings were turning into love. How increasingly hard it was becoming to resist her, to resist placing a kiss on her lips. But what did she feel for him? She was so hard to read sometimes. There were moments he thought perhaps she cared for him the way he did for her, but then those moments disappeared, and he was left wondering if he had imagined everything.

"Thank you so much," Ben said. "I appreciate it."

"It's nothing," Lydia said. "I mean, it's the least I could do for all that you've, uh, done for me. Teaching me to ride your horse and... everything."

Ben gazed directly at Lydia, trying to hold her eyes. She glanced down, back at him, down again, her body squirming. What was she thinking? Was it possible she wanted him as much as he wanted her? Or was he just making her nervous? Maybe the shortbread was simply a token of her appreciation, a token of friendship.

Or maybe it was so much more.

But as much as he wanted Lydia, there was a force holding him back. And Ben knew exactly what that force was: the fear of Walter and Moses arriving, ruining everything.

"I have something for you, too," Ben said.

"You do?" Lydia asked, her voice filled with surprise.

"I do." Ben grabbed his bag and rummaged through it, pulling out the book. He brushed it off, then passed it to Lydia.

Lydia gasped as she took the book from Ben. "Jane Eyre!" She ran her fingers along the book, touching it as if it was a precious jewel. "I can't believe it! How did you find this?"

"A merchant passing through." Ben took a step closer to Lydia. Their bodies were so close, so near. All he had to do was reach out and pull her to him. "Have you heard of the book before?"

"Oh yes," Lydia said. "I've been wanting to read it, but I had no way of getting a copy."

"Then I'm even more glad I was able to find it."

Lydia glanced up at him, expectant, her dark eyes searching his face. So many unspoken emotions swirled around them. Ben's heart thudded inside him, only held back by his ribcage. If ever there had been a time to kiss her, now was the time.

But he couldn't. Ben thrust his hands in his pockets and took a step back.

## Chapter 30

Lydia clutched the book, her mind still unable to wrap itself around the fact that Ben had bought it for her. He'd remembered her love for reading, and he'd found her a new book. Which meant... he'd been thinking about her. But was he only thinking about her as a friend? Or was he wanting something more, the way she was starting to want something more? He was standing so close, gazing at her so intently. Oh how she wished she knew what went on in that mind of his.

But then he took a step back, the moment ending as it always did.

"I can't wait to read this," Lydia said.

"You'll have to tell me all about it when you do."

Lydia cocked her head. Was he being serious? No man ever seemed to be interested in her books or love of reading. "You really want to know?"

"Sure! Why not?"

"I guess... Well, I'm not used to anyone asking me to do that," Lydia said.

"I'm not like anyone else," Ben said, his voice low and sultry. He took a step closer to her, nearing her again. Rapid-fire heartbeats vibrated throughout Lydia's body as her heart picked up speed. Ben slipped the book from Lydia's hand and set it on his makeshift worktable. Then he reached up and tucked a strand of hair underneath her bonnet, his fingers caressing her cheek as he did. Lydia caught her breath, afraid to move, afraid for the moment to end. His touch sent a surge of emotions zipping through her body, like lightning bolts crackling in the sky.

And then suddenly his arms were wrapped around her, pulling her into an embrace. There was strength in Ben's arms, but he was trembling, too, a vulnerability hidden behind his muscular physique. Lydia leaned against his chest, the speedy clip of his heartbeat echoing in her ear. She breathed in deeply, committing his manly scent of sweat and sawdust to memory. Ben pulled her back, ever gently, his eyes searching her face. He was trying to tell



her something, Lydia was confident, trying to tell her something with his eyes that his soul wouldn't allow him to speak. Something that troubled him, something he wanted her to know.

But Lydia didn't have time to figure out what it was. The next thing she knew, his lips were on hers, pressed against them firmly. He was filled with passion, as if he wanted to tell her through his kiss how deeply he cared about her, how much she meant to him. And in that moment Lydia knew she loved Ben, knew that she needed to be by his side for the rest of her life. She knew then why she had to give up everything to move to California, knew that she never had and never would love a man the way she loved Ben. It was Ben, always was and always would be.

But then the kiss ended, as abruptly as it had begun. Ben took a step back, taking his warm body heat with him. A chill ran over Lydia, even in the hot sun. Ben's face scrunched in concern. He ran his fingers through his hair, pulling on the ends. "I—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

Sorry? Panic seized Lydia. Why was Ben sorry? Had he not felt as she had felt? Had he only been caught up in a moment of passion, not love? "There's—there's nothing to be sorry about," Lydia stammered, her voice cracking as she spoke.

Ben's face softened. He took her hand in his, rubbing her skin with his finger. The panic slipped out of Lydia, replaced again by excitement. "You're so beautiful," Ben said. Oh, Lydia had been told she was beautiful dozens of times, insincere compliments from the miners desperate for a woman, any woman. But there was a sincerity in Ben's tone that was different, different than anyone else who had ever told her she was beautiful.

"Thank you," Lydia said. "You're not bad looking yourself."

"Ha!" Ben said. "Except for this blasted birthmark, right? I always wished I could rub it off when I was a kid. I used to sneak soap and scrub and scrub until I was raw."

Lydia's eyes drifted to the heart-shaped mark on Ben's jawline. She loved the birthmark, loved the way it gave Ben his own, unique identity. "Oh no. You can't get rid of that."

"So I learned," Ben said with a chuckle. "The other kids around town used to tease me relentlessly about it. They said I was a hopeless romantic."

"Well?" Lydia hesitated. "Are you?"

Ben's face fell serious again. He gazed directly into Lydia's eyes,

his own eyes intense. Lydia squirmed, but she forced herself to hold steady, to not look away. "I suppose I am."

They stood in silence for a few moments, the only sound a woodpecker drumming against a tree. Ben squeezed Lydia's hand, ever gently. She wished she knew what he was thinking, wished he could trust her with whatever burdened his heart. But that would come in time, Lydia told herself. This... this was only the beginning.

Lydia didn't want to leave, but she knew she had to. There was still much to do to prepare for the evening, and soon the men would start filing in, weary and exhausted after a long day of heavy labor. She let out a long sigh. "I have to get back to work."

Ben stuck out his lip in an exaggerated frown. "Already? But I suppose you're right. I don't want your parents mad at me for keeping you out here too long." He squeezed Lydia's hand one more time, then let her fingers fall from his. He grabbed the book and passed it to Lydia.

"Thank you again," Lydia said, clutching the book to her chest.

"And thank you for my shortbread." Ben paused, then leaned down and kissed Lydia once more, soft and gentle. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

Lydia slowly bobbed her head up and down. Soon could not come soon enough.

As she hurried back toward the cafe, Lydia felt as though she were flying through the air, her feet never hitting the ground. So this was what love felt like, she told herself. No wonder people dedicated their lives to finding it; no wonder people wrote poems and sonnets and books all devoted to this thing called love. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world, enough to strip away all of life's problems, to make everything else seem so unimportant in comparison.

Love. Yes, she was definitely in love.

# Chapter 31

Ben stood in the same spot for a long time after Lydia left. He hated watching her leave, taking yet another piece of his heart with her.

Because despite all his effort to guard his heart, to only enjoy the moments with her and nothing more, he had fallen completely in love with Lydia.

There was no better feeling than what he felt when she was in his arms, his lips on hers. It had been as if time literally had stopped, as if the only people who existed were he and Lydia. As if nothing else mattered, as if no problems prevailed. She did that to him; she made him momentarily forget his troubles, forget his past. She brought light to his darkness, giving him hope and a sense of purpose.

Bullet snorted, shaking out his mane, as if he was telling Ben he was a fool. Ben knew that Bullet was right, knew that he *was* a fool to get involved. They could never have a future together. But Ben shoved those thoughts to the side. He didn't know where he would go from there, didn't know what he would do next. But he didn't want to think about that right then. Right then, the only thing he wanted to think about was the way he felt holding Lydia, the way her small frame fit so perfectly in his arms. It was as if they were made for each other, like two pieces of a puzzle that clicked into place.

Ben closed his eyes, and there Lydia stood before him, her sweet face nervous and trembling, those dark, jasper eyes that guarded her emotions so well. In his mind, she took off her bonnet, let her brunette hair cascade down her back. Then he kissed her again, showing her in his kiss what he could not tell her with his voice.

Ben opened his eyes, dismayed to find himself alone once again. He ought to get back to work, he told himself. His breath rushed out in a long sigh as he picked up his saw.

He was in love with her. And he had no idea what to do about it.

## Chapter 32

Lydia hummed as she half skipped, half walked down Main Street. She ought to be exhausted; she had barely slept a wink overnight, her mind replaying the kiss with Ben over and over. But instead, she felt more energized than she had experienced in her life. Nothing bothered her, not even the crankiest customers or another lecture from Father on why she wasn't married yet. *I will be soon*, she had thought to herself.

She'd decided she needed a few new dresses, dresses she could look pretty in for Ben. Her current ones were so worn and faded, and so she'd hurried to finish her food prep so that she had time for a quick trip to the Devereux's dry goods and clothing store. Lydia couldn't afford any of the new dresses that came in, but she had a little pocket money saved up, enough to buy some material and thread. She had no idea when she would have time to sew them, but she would make herself time. A few stitches before work in the morning, a few between the midday and evening rushes, a few before bed.

"Afternoon, Lydia." It was Teddy Devereux, the son of the owners of the dry goods and clothing store, leaning against a post in front of his family shop. He was a young man, around sixteen or seventeen, the most polite young man Lydia had ever met.

"Hi, Teddy," Lydia said. "Busy day today?"

"Oh yeah." A bead of sweat dripped down Teddy's cheek. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it off. "Several new prospectors came in wanting those new denim pants. I think they must have bought half our supply."

"That's good for you," Lydia said.

Teddy nodded, cracking a grin. "Yes, but now I'm exhausted."

Lydia said goodbye and entered the shop. The shelves were full, lined with a variety of hats, rubber boots for panners and sturdy boots for miners, the new denim pants that the miners swore lasted ten times longer than any other type, belts made of leather. The display cases appealed more to women, filled with pretty ribbons and threads and supplies a lady might need for sewing. Lydia's eyes

fell on two new dresses hanging on mannequins, the collars full of lace, complete with roses on the hip. Dancing dresses, not the type of thing that interested Lydia, but she imagined Betty would love them.

Charity Devereux and Eve Landry, two of her sister's closest friends, whispered together in front of shelves filled with men's Panama and felt hats. Lydia liked Charity and Eve, but she had never clicked with them the way Betty had. The three of them had been much more interested in flirting with boys and going to dances, activities that Lydia had had no desire for. And they had never understood Lydia's preference to be home with a book after a long day working and talking with people, never understood Lydia's need for alone time to recharge her energy.

"Why hello, Lydia," greeted Mrs. Devereux. She was an attractive woman who could easily pass for Charity's sister instead of her mother. "How can I help you?"

"I need some material for a couple dresses," Lydia said.

"Any particular colors you have in mind?" Mrs. Devereux asked.

Lydia pursed her lips as she eyed the stacks of fabric on the shelves behind the counter. What colors would catch Ben's eyes? Maybe something bold, something bright. Lydia normally gravitated toward muted colors, soft pastels of pink and yellow, colors that would let her blend in more. This time, though, she wanted something that would stand out, something that would make Ben take notice. "Whatever you have that's bright."

Mrs. Devereux raised her eyebrows, no doubt surprised by Lydia's choice. "We just got in some new fabrics I think you'll like. I haven't got a chance to put them out yet. Let me grab a few options for you." She disappeared into her storage room.

Lydia drummed her fingers on the counter as she waited for Mrs. Devereux to return. She pictured herself in a new dress, a bright shade of fuchsia, imagined Ben's face lighting up as he saw her. She pictured him kissing her again, and a thrill swept through her body. Nearby, Eve and Charity were talking animatedly, Eve's hands flailing about as she spoke, but Lydia didn't pay them much attention. She was too lost in her own thoughts, daydreaming about Ben.

But then Lydia heard mention of Ben's name, making her ears perk up.

"Ben?" Charity said. "I don't know any Ben."

“Me neither,” Eve said. “But these two men kept insisting that I had to know someone named Ben.”

“That’s really scary,” Charity said.

“It was! They wouldn’t leave. They kept snooping around, as if I had someone named Ben hidden in the stalls.”

A chill ran down Lydia’s spine. Were these men searching for her Ben? Was he in danger?

“What did they look like?” Charity asked.

“Tall.” Eve held her hand up high above her head, standing on her tiptoes. “Permanent snarls on their faces, as if their only joy was beating up other men. And their rifles were huge.”

“Geez. There are enough problems with fights and duels in this town as it is,” Charity said.

“Exactly,” Eve said. “I was so thankful when my father arrived, and they finally left.”

Charity shivered. “Frightening.”

The hairs on Lydia’s arm stood up tall, but she told herself to remain calm. They couldn’t be looking for her Ben. It was a common name; there were lots of Bens in the world. Besides, out West there were always men looking for other men. And it was always about money, a claim, or a woman. Ben had enough money to cover himself, or at least it seemed. He wasn’t prospecting, so there couldn’t be any disagreement over a claim. And Lydia was his only woman, his only female friend even, and there certainly weren’t any men fighting over her. So it couldn’t be Ben.

Charity and Eve moved on to another topic, the upcoming dance for the weekend. But their conversation left a feeling of concern in Lydia. She couldn’t quite identify what it was, but she couldn’t shake it either.

“Here we go!” Mrs. Devereux returned to the front of the store, carrying a few different material options. “Look at this turquoise, and the delicate pink flowers on it. So pretty. And what do you think of this yellow? So bright and sunny, no? I’ve also found this bright pink with thin white stripes, sure to catch the eye of any man.”

They were all pretty patterns, but none of them excited Lydia. Her thoughts were too clouded by Charity and Eve’s conversation; she was too concerned about Ben. No matter how much she tried to convince herself otherwise, she couldn’t help but be worried that those men might be looking for him, hunting him down. But Lydia

bought all three fabrics anyway, telling herself she would be glad later that she had. Lydia paid Mrs. Devereux and left, hoping that the fresh air outside would help clear her mind.

It didn't. The feeling that something bad was going to happen wouldn't go away.

# Chapter 33

His body was physically exhausted after another long day of physical labor, but sleep eluded Ben. The muffled voices and laughter from the lobby had ceased long ago. It had to be late, but still Ben couldn't get to sleep. All he could do was think about Lydia, think about what he was going to do.

He hadn't meant to kiss her. But he could see the way her body trembled before him; he could sense her desire for a kiss was as strong as his own. The magnetic pull between them had become too strong, no matter how much he told himself he shouldn't do it, that it wasn't fair to either of them but more so to Lydia. But oh that kiss. How magical it had been, as if it had transported him to a faraway place where worries ceased to be and only true love existed. Lydia was so reserved, but in that kiss all her reservation peeled away, her true passion left exposed.

The words were never spoken, but they were communicated so loudly in the kiss. She loved him, as much as he loved her.

But what to do? Ben tossed to his other side, pulling up the thin sheet. The wind blew outside, causing the window pane to clatter. Oh what to do, what to do? Should he tell her, tell her about his past? But what if she didn't believe him? Then it would have been for nothing, and his chances with her would be ruined. What if she ran into Walter and Moses? If she knew nothing, she would be fine. But if she knew the truth, her life could be in danger. That wasn't a good option either. His first duty was to protect her.

And what if Lydia told someone, and that person told someone else, and then that person told someone else? Ben hadn't even told his secrets to anyone in the last town, and still someone ratted him out, still Walter and Moses came so close to finding him. He'd promised himself he wouldn't trust anyone. Even someone he fell in love with.

Besides, being dead wouldn't do either of them any good.

Ben flipped back to his other side, covering his head with his pillow. There was no good solution, no good answer.

All he knew was that he loved her. And that love could get them



both in a heap of trouble one day. One day soon.

# Chapter 34

Beads of sweat formed on Lydia's neck, dripping down her back, and she wished she hadn't done her corset so tight. With little ventilation other than a few open windows, the church was stuffy and downright hot. Pastor Johnson droned on, his sermon all over the place. Lydia tried to focus, tried to pull pieces of wisdom that she could apply to her own life. But it was too hot and her thoughts were, as usual, on Ben. She hadn't seen him since the day of the kiss. Or since she'd overheard the conversation between Charity and Eve.

They hadn't made any plans for after church that day, but Lydia hoped he would give her another horseback riding lesson. She tried to turn her head, ever so subtly, to see if Ben was sitting toward the back, but Mother poked her in the ribs and shot her *the look*. Lydia would have to wait until after the service to see if Ben was even there.

At last the final song was sung and Pastor Johnson gave a closing prayer. Lydia jumped up, her eyes scanning the congregation in search of Ben. And then she spotted him, seated toward the back, staring right at her. He winked, sending a chill of excitement down her back.

"Going to spend time with Ben again?" Betty asked.

"Maybe," Lydia said, as casually as possible.

Lydia made her way to the back of the church, weaving around groups who had gathered together in the aisle to talk. Outside, Ben was waiting for her, off to the side. "Why hello," he said, his smile showing off a full grid of teeth. What a wonderful feeling it was to know that she was the reason for his smile, that she was able to make him happy with merely her presence.

"Hi," Lydia said. She longed to rush into his arms, to feel them wrap around her. But this wasn't the place, not there at church.

"I was thinking maybe we would try something different today," Ben said.

"Oh?"

"How would you like to try riding together?"

Lydia raised her eyebrows. "Together?"

"Ya," Ben said. "So what do you say?"

Lydia pictured herself on the back of Bullet, her arms clinging tight to Ben as the wind whipped by. "I'd love to!"

Lydia followed Ben over to Bullet, who nibbled on a spot of grass. "I borrowed a special saddle. That way we can both fit better."

Lydia froze. Had he borrowed the saddle from the livery stable? She had never seen Ben speak to the Landrys at church, but if Ben went to the livery stable, that would mean that Eve or Mr. Landry would have met him. What if they told those men—whomever they were—that they had found someone named Ben? It would be a case of mistaken identity, of course; her sweet Ben would never be someone that other people were looking for. Still. She didn't like even the possibility of Ben being in danger.

"Is that from the livery stable?" Lydia tried to keep her lower lip from trembling as she spoke.

Ben cocked his head. "Is there something I should be worried about with the livery stable?" he asked with a laugh. "Diseased horses? Saddles that fall apart?"

"Well no..." How did Lydia explain the conversation she'd overheard?

"Don't worry," Ben said. "I borrowed the saddle from Solomon."

Lydia jetted out a sigh of relief through a crack in her lips. "Oh! Wonderful."

A quizzical expression crossed Ben's face, but he didn't press her further. "This here is called a pillion. It has a special pad for a second rider. I'll sit in the front, and you'll sit in the back and hang on to me." The corners of the right side of his lips crept up into a crooked half-smile. "If you don't mind, that is."

The heat rose to Lydia's cheeks. Of course she didn't mind. In fact, she loved the idea of riding behind Ben, hanging on to his strong body. "That's fine."

"Good. Now let me help you on, and then I'll jump on." With Ben's assistance, Lydia climbed onto Bullet. She was still clumsy and ungraceful, causing Ben to chuckle as she nearly fell back off. Once she was situated, Ben hoisted himself into the front of the saddle. "Now wrap your arms around me, and hang on tight."

Lydia did as she was instructed, putting her arms under his and around his waist. The feel of him so close struck her breathless, and

her heart pranced inside her like a child doing cartwheels.

“Tighter,” Ben said.

“Hmm?”

“Tighter,” Ben repeated. “We’re going to go fast, so hold on tight.”

Lydia increased her grip around Ben.

“That’s better,” Ben said. “Let’s go, boy.”

Bullet started a light trot, heading over to the meadow where they had practiced in the weeks before. Once they were there, Ben increased Bullet’s speed, slowly at first, until they were in a full gallop. The wind whistled in Lydia’s ears, and she held on tight to Ben, allowing her body to become one with the rhythmic movement of the horse. Knowing that Ben was in control, Lydia was able to enjoy this gallop so much more than the first time. Bullet flew around the meadow, as if he was a bird soaring above the ground, as if this was what he was truly born to do.

After several times around the meadow, Ben brought Bullet back to a slower trot. “Would you like to head down to the river?”

“That sounds nice.” Lydia wasn’t sure what Ben had planned, but any time with him was bound to be wonderful.

Ben led Bullet toward the principal drag of Coyote Pass, down Main Street, past the general store and blacksmith shop and the busy saloons. It never ceased to amaze Lydia how men were always gathered around the saloons no matter the time of the day, no matter the day of the week. Even on a Sunday. They continued down Main Street, where the wood buildings turned into the tents of the prospectors. Men gathered together, passing the time playing cards and smoking cigarettes, their one day of rest before returning to the toil of searching for gold. Lydia wondered if they ever regretted leaving everything behind in search of gold that wasn’t to be found.

Bullet stopped as they arrived near the slow-moving river. Overhead, a hawk soared, squealing as it announced its presence. A frog hopped into the water, causing a circle of ripples. Three trees floated down the river, a reminder to Lydia of the increased efforts the men were taking to find gold at any cost, destroying the land in the process.

Ben hopped off of Bullet, then helped Lydia down. “It’s peaceful here.”

“It is,” Lydia agreed.

Ben led Bullet to the edge of the river and let him drink. He was quieter than normal, and Lydia wondered what went through his mind. There was still so much of him she didn't know, so much of him left to learn. There were ways in which he seemed so open, but then there were also parts of him that he guarded so fiercely. She thought of the conversation she'd overheard between Charity and Eve. Could he possibly be the Ben those two men were searching for?

Impossible, Lydia told herself. She might not know Ben entirely, but she knew that he was caring and kind, that he had a good heart. Besides, she had her own secrets that she had never shared, like how Andrew had broken her heart. It didn't change anything between them now if they didn't know about a past love or broken heart. That was in the past. Her and Ben were the now, the future.

She loved him. And there was nothing she could imagine that would change that.

# Chapter 35

There was something so innocent, so sweet about Lydia. She had to have a fighting spirit to survive out West, to be an instrumental part in carving out a successful business in a town that hadn't even existed a decade earlier. Yet she retained a quality about her that remained untouched, as if she'd never been through rough times, as if she only had goodness and joy to offer. Ben had never met another woman like her, and he doubted he would ever again.

Lydia stood, patiently waiting, as Ben led Bullet to the water's edge for a drink, her fingers toying with the edges of her dress. She was so beautiful to him, yet so unassuming, as if she had no idea the effect she had on men. Ben wanted nothing more than to swoop her up in his arms again, to touch his lips to hers once more. Oh what had he done, getting his heart so involved? And worse, what was he going to do to her heart when one day he was gone?

But if there was anything he'd learned in the previous town, it was how quickly things could change. There, he'd started to settle, started to get used to that way of life. But everything changed in an instant when Walter and Moses showed up outside the place where he was staying. Ben had to flee, with only enough time to grab his bags and go. He left behind clothes and a few of his tools and other personal necessities. After what happened, Ben promised himself that he'd never stay in any town too long, that he'd keep himself far enough ahead of Walter and Moses.

But he hadn't planned on meeting a woman like Lydia. He hadn't planned on falling in love.

None of this was fair to Lydia. She had no reason to suspect Ben wasn't there to stay, no reason to doubt their relationship wasn't heading toward marriage. Except, he couldn't stay. And he couldn't marry her, no matter how much he yearned for a woman like her by his side every day. Try as he did to come up with a scenario where it might work, where he and Lydia could end up with some sort of happy ever after, Ben couldn't. Walter and Moses had already found where he was staying twice, and if Ben didn't keep moving, they were sure to find him again.

Ben took a deep breath and sighed it out. If only he could squeeze his eyes shut and make his problems disappear. For a second, he once again debated telling Lydia, telling her of his past, of why they could never be together. But no, he couldn't burden her with that. For now, he was going to savor the time with her. He would always carry her in his heart, even when the day arrived that he'd never physically see her again.

After Bullet finished drinking, Ben inched his way closer to Lydia. She froze, her head tilted up, her eyes searching his face. Ben pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her, cradling her small head to his chest. The need to protect her swept over him, like a wave crashing on the shore. He would do anything to make sure she was safe.

Even if that meant leaving.

## Chapter 36

Mondays were normally Lydia's least favorite day of the week and the most difficult to peel herself from the bed, knowing how much work lay before her. But on this Monday, Lydia was up before the sun, working on one of the new dresses she was sewing. She hadn't slept much, her mind too busy replaying the events of the day before with Ben, her body tingling with excitement. Being in Ben's arms had felt so... wonderful, as if that was where she was meant to be. And then he had kissed her again with so much passion, so much vulnerability.

It was only a matter of time before he asked her to marry him, Lydia was sure. And to think, it was her father who had pushed them to spend time together! How much she had hated her parents' interventions, their constant pressure to marry. That seemed like such a different time, yet it was only a few weeks earlier. A time when Lydia still licked the wounds of her broken heart from Andrew, a time when she assumed there would never be a man she would care to marry. And now, here she was on the verge of a proposal.

Lydia pulled the needle through the fabric, humming as she worked. Love was indeed a splendid thing. Of course, Ben hadn't said the words *I love you* yet, but Lydia was sure that he did. He told her in other ways, in the way he held her as if she might break, in the way he kissed her without reservation, in the way his hazel eyes searched every inch of her face. Surely he would say the words soon, and Lydia would reply with a resolute *I love you, too*.

The memory of the overheard conversation between Charity and Eve crossed Lydia's mind, but she shoved those thoughts to the side. Several days had already passed since then, and Lydia hadn't heard anything further of men looking for a Ben. She'd been a bit nervous at the beginning, but spending time with Ben the day before had doused any worries. It was impossible that anyone could be looking for *her* Ben.

"You're up early this morning."

Lydia glanced up from her sewing to see her mother, dressed



and ready for work. "I thought I'd get to work on some of the new clothes I'm making," she said as casually as possible.

"I think that's a fabulous idea," Mother said. "Make a good impression on that fine young gentleman who's making our furniture."

"Oh Mother." But Lydia couldn't conceal her smile. Even the most offhand mention of Ben brought a joy to Lydia that she couldn't contain.

Mother sat beside Lydia and grabbed some of the fabric. "We have a few minutes to spare before we need to get to work. Let me help you."

They worked in silence for a while, and Lydia wondered if there had ever been a time when her mother sewed a dress to impress her father, a time when she dreamed about the day he might propose. They had always been *her parents* to her, figures of discipline and duty, but her mother had been Lydia's age once, too. It made her giggle to think of her father doing silly things in his quest to win her mother's love or her mother ogling over her father.

"What's so funny?" Mother asked.

"Nothing," Lydia said.

"I find that hard to believe."

"If you insist, I was picturing you sewing dresses trying to impress Father."

"So you admit that your dress making is an effort to impress a certain gentleman?"

"Oh, well..."

"But yes, a very long time ago, a lifetime ago, I made myself a beautiful ball gown in the hopes of attracting a certain young man. It was a soft shade of pink, full of lace and flowers along the bodice." A faraway look crossed Mother's face, as if she was transported back in time, back before the wrinkles had begun to crease around her eyes and the gray had begun to dominate her once-luscious locks.

"Obviously the dress worked," Lydia said. "Look at you and Father now, all these years married."

"Oh, it wasn't your father I was trying to impress! It was his friend."

A laugh sprang from Lydia's belly. A sly grin crossed Mother's lips, and Lydia realized how little she knew of her Mother's past, how many secrets she must carry in her heart. At that moment,

Lydia saw her mother a little differently. She wasn't just a parent but someone who had been a young woman, someone who had had her own hopes and dreams and ambitions.

"So what happened?" Lydia asked.

Mother waved his hand. "Oh he turned out to be so dull. I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life with him. And then... well, it's because of him that I met your father."

Lydia thought of Estelle marrying Andrew. She had been so hurt by the news, so utterly devastated. But now that she'd met Ben, she understood why things hadn't worked out the way she had originally wanted. "Did he and Father stay friends?"

"Goodness no," Mother said. "But I think he came to accept it in time. He ended up marrying a lovely girl who was a much better fit for him."

A much better fit. Like Estelle for Andrew, Ben for her.

Father emerged from the bedroom, dressed for work. "What are you ladies out here jabbering about?"

"Nothing," Mother and Lydia said in unison.

Father's eyes darted back and forth between mother and daughter. "Nothing, huh?"

"Nothing to concern yourself over." Mother set down the fabric, then stood and gave Father a kiss to the cheek. "You ready to go?"

Lydia folded up the fabric, careful to mark where she had left off with her needle. With her mother's help, she had made good progress on the first of the dresses. If she kept this up, she should have the dress ready for Sunday. Sunday: her favorite day of the week, the day that had become her and Ben's day. If only it wasn't so far away.



\* \* \*

"Hands to yourself, Matty," Lydia said as one of their regular diners

reached for her arm. She gave it a gentle slap. "This isn't that kind of place."

Matty's friends roared with laughter. "Listen to the lady, *Matty*," one of the friends teased.

"Better luck next time," one of the other friends said.

Lydia rolled her eyes, but she couldn't help but smile. Unlike Betty, who had lived for the gentlemen's attention before she married, it had always annoyed Lydia. She hated their false pretenses, that the only thing they cared about was that her shell was a woman, not caring about the woman she was on the inside. But these days, little bothered Lydia anymore. Nothing else mattered with Ben in her life.

"Aren't you becoming quite the belle of the dining hall," Betty said as Lydia returned to the kitchen.

Lydia dumped the stack of dirty plates she had collected into the washing bin. "Haha. It's only because you're no longer available, and I'm all that's left."

"The men can't resist you." Betty held out her hand, her tin ring catching the light of the sun through the window. "But before long, you'll have one of these, too. Then the men won't know what to do with neither of us available."

"Oh Betty," Lydia said. Just to think, she might have a nice little ring, too. Betty's ring wasn't much, but it symbolized everything. It symbolized the love and devotion that Jackson had for Betty, the love and devotion Lydia hoped Ben would soon promise to her. The material might not be worth much, but the pledge of commitment was worth far more than any gold or diamonds.

"There's no point in pretending you don't want it," Betty said. "I can see it written all over your face, like those books you read."

"Maybe..."

"I see the way you two look at each other. If I wasn't so in love with Jackson myself, I'd say it was quite disgusting."

The two girls giggled together. Lydia loved those types of moments with her sister, loved that despite their polar-opposite differences, they still could talk and laugh and enjoy each other's company. Oh there were moments when Betty drove Lydia bonkers, certainly, but Lydia wouldn't trade her sister for any other.

Lydia loaded up her arms with plates and carried them out to the dining hall. It was mid-morning; the rush of the early morning diners had passed, but there were still a few stragglers. Men who

had stayed up too late in the saloons, too weary to pull their heads off of their pillows and head off to a hard day of labor. Lydia passed out the plates of eggs and potatoes to the men.

When Lydia returned to the kitchen, she found Sarah standing there, her eyes as wide as if she'd seen a ghost. She didn't have her basket for delivering goodies or her bonnet, and she was breathing heavily.

"What's wrong?" Lydia asked, alarm immediately seizing her. Had something happened to Calvin? To Jackson? An accident at the blacksmith shop? Lydia's mind raced through a dozen scenarios that could have occurred.

Sarah clutched Lydia's arm, her fingers shaking. "We need to talk."

"Alright," Lydia said.

Sarah's eyes darted around the kitchen. Mother and Father had their backs to them, but Lydia knew their ears were perked up. "Outside," Sarah whispered.

Lydia followed Sarah outside, her alarm and curiosity increasing as the seconds ticked by. What could Sarah have to tell her that needed to be told away from others? None of the possibilities that Lydia came up with fit. They stopped in the shade of a large oak tree behind the cafe.

"I don't know how to tell you this..." Sarah's voice trailed off.

Despite the heat, the hairs on Lydia's arms stood straight up, and a chill ran down her back. "Just say it, whatever it is."

Sarah's shoulders rose as she took in a deep breath. "This morning, two men showed up at the blacksmith shop. I got a very bad feeling about them. They looked like the type that couldn't be up to any good. And they were—they were looking for someone."

Two men looking for someone, just like the two men looking for a Ben at the livery stable. Lydia tried to swallow, but a lump filled her throat.

"They were looking for someone named Ben," Sarah continued, her voice barely above a whisper.

It was okay, Lydia tried to reassure herself. They weren't looking for her Ben, couldn't be looking for her Ben. Her Ben was too sweet, too kind. He couldn't conceivably have any troubles with anyone.

"There are lots of men named Ben," Lydia said, trying to keep her voice light.

Sarah shook her head. "It's—It's your Ben."

Lydia lowered her eyebrows into a V. "Ben couldn't possibly have any connection to people like that," she said, forcing her voice to sound more confident than she felt.

"They said they are looking for a Ben with a heart-shaped birthmark on his face."

The earth started to spin, the ground snatched from under Lydia's feet. Her heart dropped with a clunk, and a knot of air caught in her chest. If these unscrupulous men were searching for Ben, then he was in danger. She had to get to him, fast.

"We have to tell Ben." Lydia's voice quivered as much as her body. "He could be in danger." She turned, but Sarah grabbed her arm.

"Wait! Ben's not the one in danger."

Lydia stopped. Sarah's words made no sense. How could Ben not be in danger when there were men looking for him, hunting him down? A headache throbbed at Lydia's temples. "I don't understand."

"Ben's not the one in danger." Sarah hesitated, then continued. "You are."

Lydia rubbed her temples with her thumb and index finger, more confused than ever. How could she be in danger if the men were looking for Ben and not her? For all she knew, these men didn't even know she existed. "You're not making any sense."

Sarah took Lydia's hand in hers and squeezed it. "Ben—Ben is a murderer. Those men are searching for him because he murdered their brother."

# Chapter 37

Ben threw a tarp over the table, then gathered up his tools. It was dark out, the sun close to setting. Ben had worked as long as he could, using up every last second of sunlight. But the light was gone, and Ben had no choice but to call it a day.

“Time to go home, boy,” Ben said as he hopped onto Bullet. Home. Well, not exactly home. Ben hadn’t had a real home in years. He pictured his real home, back in Texas, his mother crying as he explained why he had to leave that night. He pictured his father and brothers and sisters, continuing their lives without him. Ben jetted a hiss through a crack in his lips. There was no point thinking about that now when there was nothing he could do to change the past.

Besides, all he had to do was think about Lydia, and she melted away the pain of leaving home. It was still there, of course, lingering in the background. But like cool water to a burn, Lydia brought relief, made everything seem right in the world. At least, Ben could pretend it was.

Ben rode Bullet through the woods and back to Main Street. The stores and shops were closed by then, but the saloons were in full swing. He passed by Golden Palace Saloon, the tunes of the honkey tonk piano spilling out. Men sang along, their voices slurred and off-key. Ben chuckled to himself, glad that none of that had ever interested him. A moment later, men came tumbling out, their fists flying. Ben pressed his legs against Bullet, hurrying him away from the scene.

The sky was fully dark as Ben reached Waterman Hotel. Ben tilted his head back as he climbed the steps to the lobby, gazing up at the stars. He remembered laying on the ground while on cattle runs, staring up at the night sky, sleep alluding him as he pondered the grandeur of the world. He’d tried counting them once, but there were far too many.

Ben pulled open the door and stepped inside the lobby. The room was packed, men talking and laughing, catching up on the latest news. Ben wasn’t ready to retire to his room yet, and he

wondered if his new friends were up to a game of cards. He spotted Solomon and Ellis, heading his way. Ben waved, but Solomon and Ellis didn't wave back, their brows wrinkled, as if they were angry.

Ben glanced between Solomon and Ellis. "Rough day?" Ben tried to keep his voice light, but an uneasy feeling washed over him.

"You could say that," Solomon said. His eyes tightened at the corners. "Had these two men show up, demanding to see a list of our guests."

A lump filled Ben's throat. Walter and Moses. They were there. Ben had always known that he was living with Lydia on borrowed time. That in a matter of a second, without warning, everything could be over. That if he wanted to live, he would need to flee Coyote Pass, just as he had fled the other towns.

But this time it was much more complicated.

"Sorry you had to deal with that," Ben said.

Ellis pinned his crossed arms over his chest, his eyes narrow slits. "They were looking for someone named *Ben*."

Ben swallowed, the lump making it difficult. He forced a laugh. "There are a lot of Bens."

Solomon pursed his lips. "A lot of Bens with heart-shaped birthmarks?" He pointed to Ben's face.

Without thinking, Ben's hand flew to his jaw. He'd always hated that birthmark, and now he hated it even more. He was marked for life, like Cain.

"We know what you did." Ellis patted the gun in his holster. "We know that you murdered their brother."

Ben held up his hands in defense. "Look, fellas. It's not what it seems. I can—"

"We told them we didn't have any Bens staying in our hotel," Solomon said. "But I don't think they believed us. There's enough fights in this town as it is. We don't want none of that here. You have five minutes to get your stuff and scram."

Solomon and Ellis glared at Ben. It wasn't too long ago that they had been sitting around their makeshift table, laughing and playing cards, becoming friends. But it was over now, just as Ben had feared it one day would be. His time in Coyote Pass had come to an end.

"What are you waiting for?" Solomon pulled out his pocket watch. "Your five minutes are ticking."

Ben hesitated. He carried his essentials with him at all times, in case he ever needed to turn and run. The only thing left in his room

were a couple pairs of clothes and a new pillow he'd spoiled himself with. Nothing he couldn't live without. Could he trust Solomon and Ellis? What if they were lying to him? What if Walter and Moses were waiting for him in his room, guns drawn?

No, Solomon and Ellis wouldn't want that in their hotel. They wouldn't want a bloody mess to clean up or their mother or sister to witness a dead man's body strewn across the floor. Still, he had to get out of the hotel, fast. Ben scrambled up the stairs, two at a time, and down the hall to his room. His hand shook as he opened the door, but the room was empty. No sign of Walter and Moses. Ben grabbed his clothes and pillow, then took one last glance around the room. It was back to sleeping on the ground again.

"If you know what's best, you'll go far, far away," Ellis said as Ben returned to the lobby.

"But I didn't—" Ben began, but then stopped. It wasn't worth it. Their mind was decided. Continuing the discussion would only waste precious time explaining something that they wouldn't believe anyway. And what did it matter? After this, Ben would never see Solomon or Ellis again. Ben pulled a few coins from his pocket and passed them to Solomon. "Your family was very hospitable to me while I was here. I thank you for that."

Solomon snatched the coins from Ben. In the background, Ben caught sight of Samantha, laughing with a few of the patrons. How much simpler their lives were, how much less complicated. Samantha waved, and Ben waved back.

"That's enough." Ellis motioned toward the door with a jerk of his head.

"Good night, fellas," Ben said. Then he turned and ran out the door.



## Chapter 38

Lydia lay awake, unable to sleep, staring up at the wooden ceiling. Even without the midday sun, her room was warm, and the open window did little to circulate any air. Outside, an owl hooted, and a coyote let out its eerie howl.

Lydia wasn't sure how she had made it through the day. Her whole world had been snatched from under her, taken and flipped upside down. Her body was numb, as if she'd been dropped in a frozen lake. There had been no tears; she was still in shock, still processing the reality of her situation. Everything she had known—or, more precisely, everything she had let herself believe—had been a lie. Ben wasn't the sweet man she'd come to believe he was. He was a murderer.

*A murderer.*

A shiver ran down her spine as Lydia thought of Ben's gun, always secured to his hip in its holster. Who was to say he wouldn't have gotten mad at her, pulled it out? Lydia pictured Ben with his eyes ablaze, pointing his pistol at his victim. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the image to leave her mind. A murderer. Oh how could it be! How could her sweet Ben be capable of murdering someone?

Maybe it had been an accident. Some sort of misunderstanding. But then, the men would have said *killed*. He killed our brother. But they didn't. They used the word murder, the intentional taking of another person's life for no justifiable reason.

Of course, Ben had always been so secretive of his past. She knew almost nothing of it. He'd been a rancher who'd left for an unexplained reason to live a rather nomadic life, making furniture for people as he moved from town to town. It hadn't made much sense, but Lydia had gone along with it, too infatuated to fully care or question his motives. But she should have. She was normally so level headed, so sensible, and she tossed all that aside, and for what? For the love of a man who turned out not just to be a scumbag but a literal murderer.

Lydia flipped over and beat her pillow. How could she be such a

fool? First there was Andrew, whom she once believed loved her the way she loved him. Now there was Ben, a murderous snake whom she once believed nearly walked on water. Oh what a clueless fool she was when it came to love, when it came to the character of the men she loved. How was it possible to be so sensible about everything else in life except love?

Her heart was broken, shattered, but she was in too much shock to feel the pain yet. She knew that soon the shock would wear off and the pain would pour over her like a bucket of scalding hot water. She'd thought she was on the verge of a marriage proposal, and now... this.

And then there was a much bigger problem to deal with. Ben was dangerous. But the threat wasn't just her own life, but her family's as well. How did she get rid of him without causing a scene, without angering him to the point that he pulled out his pistol and used it on them?

Of course, if those two men found Ben first, they might take care of that for her. But Lydia didn't like that idea, either. A flood of memories swept over her—clinging to Ben as Bullet flew across the land, being wrapped in his embrace, the taste of his lips on hers. She thought of Ben's handsome face smiling down on her as he gazed into her eyes, stroking her cheek with his finger. She couldn't stand the thought of Ben being taken out, either, of the men avenging their brother's death.

It was an impossible situation, with no good solution. She was in danger, but Ben was in danger, too. And either way, Lydia didn't like the outcome.

## Chapter 39

Ben rode Bullet deep into the woods, far away from Coyote Pass. His worst fear had come to be: Walter and Moses were there, somewhere, hunting him down. Normally, Ben would have fled Coyote Pass, riding all night, leaving everything behind without much of a second thought. But this time was different. This time there was something—someone—much dearer to him than his own life.

Still, he couldn't be anything to her if he was dead.

Ben's head had known this was his reality. He'd known the day would come when Walter and Moses would find him, that they would go from town to town until he was dead. But as the weeks had passed, as Lydia had taken over his thoughts, Ben's heart had begun to deny the reality. Deep down, he'd hoped that somehow it wouldn't be, that somehow he and Lydia could find a happy-ever-after together.

Except it would never be. A life on the run wasn't what Lydia deserved. She deserved safety and security, a roof over her head, proper meals. She deserved to be with her parents and sister, whom she loved dearly. She deserved to sleep in a bed and to wake up without worrying if they were being followed. She deserved a man who could provide an actual life for her.

And there was another issue that Ben had to address: Lydia's own personal safety as well. Ben shuddered as he thought of what Walter and Moses would do to her if they discovered Lydia's close acquaintance to him. Would they kidnap her and force her at gunpoint to bring them to him? Ben wouldn't put it past them.

Oh, he should have told Lydia the truth of everything long ago! But Ben had been too scared, too scared to lose the precious little time they had together. Too scared that she wouldn't believe him, wouldn't want anything to do with him. But really, it was more than being scared; it was downright selfishness. He'd put his own desire for her companionship above even her own safety.

When he'd traveled a good distance, Ben hopped off Bullet and began to pace the ground. He had learned to be prepared to leave at

a moment's notice: important items carried in his bag at all times, a new bedroll and a stock of canned foods hidden in the woods that he could grab and take with him as he fled the town. But he hadn't prepared for the most important aspect: what to do about Lydia.

He had to tell her. He had to tell her everything. He had to tell her about the night that he caught a drunk Jake Ward dragging a young woman into a cornfield. Jake Ward, brother of Walter and Moses, married to one of the sweetest women, Millie Ward. He had to tell Lydia how Jake pulled out a gun and threatened the life of not only Ben but the young woman as well, how Ben tried to talk him out of doing them any harm.

But Jake had been in a drunken rage, furious that he'd been caught, and in a split second, Ben was forced to shoot. The young woman fled, leaving no one to corroborate Ben's story. Ben had assumed that he was in the clear, that no one else had seen him. But someone had seen him in the area, and when they found Jake's body, Ben learned that Walter and Moses pinned the death on him. They didn't care—and wouldn't believe—that their brother was capable of doing what he'd been about to do. In their minds, Ben was a murderer.

Ben filled his lungs to capacity, then let the air eke from his throat. No good solution availed itself, no matter what angle he examined it. He was going to have to recount everything to Lydia, warn her of the dangers of Walter and Moses, and make sure the men in her life were armed. And then, he was going to have to leave.

Oh, if only he had listened to his head and never gotten involved with her! Ben would never do that again, would never let himself fall for any other woman in any other town. Of course, there would never be another woman like Lydia; there would never be another woman who would capture his heart and enchant him the way Lydia had. Besides, he would be leaving his broken, shattered heart behind with her. There would be no heart left for loving someone else.

Ben decided he would stay the night in the woods, away from Coyote Pass, and hopefully away from Walter and Moses. The next morning, he would rise early and tell Lydia everything.

Ben prepared his bedroll and lay down. His chest was tight, the blood frozen in his veins. Knots coiled in his belly, and acid sloshed a blistering trail up his throat. It was going to be a long, lonely

night.



\* \* \*

As the very beginnings of orange painted the sky, Ben rose and rolled up his bed. Try as he had, he hadn't slept a wink. The ache of his heart was too intense, the pain in his stomach too powerful. He had to say goodbye to Lydia, and then he'd never see her again. He'd never again gaze into her deep brown eyes, never hear her sweet giggle that sounded like chiming bells at Christmas, never gather her into his arms. But he had no choice. He had to make sure she was safe, and then he had to leave Coyote Pass forever.

The door of Cobble Cafe was open when Ben arrived; they were already there. *Damn*, Ben thought. He'd hoped to arrive first, to catch Lydia before she got to work. Ben hesitated, trying to decide what his best plan of action should be. Leaving Bullet in the open would be dangerous, out where Walter and Moses might see him. He decided to tie Bullet to a tree in the woods, out of sight.

"I'll be back, boy." Ben rubbed Bullet's nuzzle. "Wish me luck. I'm going to need it."

Ben's heart lodged in his ribs as he walked toward the cafe, the leaves crunching under his feet. He tried to formulate the words he would say, but his mind drew a blank. Oh how could he do this? Not only was he going to tell Lydia that her life was potentially in danger, but—if she loved him at all the way he loved her—he was about to break her heart, too.

And he wouldn't be there to alleviate the pain. Instead, he would be the one causing the pain.

But before Ben made it to the steps of Cobble Cafe, Jackson emerged. His arms were wound tightly across his chest; his eyes were ablaze. Ben's heart clambered up to his throat. Lydia knew. She already knew. He foolishly hadn't considered that Lydia might

find out before he had a chance to tell her himself. Who had told her, and what had he or she said? Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

"I can explain—" Ben began.

"There's nothing to explain," Jackson said.

"Lydia could be in danger," Ben said. "I need to talk to her."

Jackson's eyes narrowed into thin slits. "The only danger to her around here is you. Now scram!"

"Jackson, please. It's not what you think. I've—"

"You don't even deny it," Jackson said. "We don't need your excuses. I know things can get a little rough out in the West, but that's no reason to murder a man. Now git."

"I need to speak to Lydia," Ben pleaded. "Just once, and then I will leave."

Jackson's eyebrows narrowed into a V. "You're not speaking with anyone. Did I not make myself clear? You need to go."

Ben eyed Jackson up and down. Ben was an inch or two taller than Jackson, but Jackson was equal in muscles, and the quality of his gun was about the same. Still, Ben felt confident he could take him on if need be. But what good would that do? Hurting Lydia's brother-in-law would do nothing to impress her, only make her hate him more.

"Look, Jackson. I just need a few minutes with Lydia."

Jackson pointed to the woods behind them. "I said go."

Convincing Jackson was pointless. Ben could make a run for the cafe, but was there any point? It would end up in a fistfight with Jackson, or worse, and that wouldn't do any good. Ben glanced at the windows, but it was too dark to see inside. Did Lydia even know he was there? Was she at the window, watching him? Or was she doing her morning chores as normal, her feelings for him already dead?

"Lydia!" Ben called out. "Lydia, please! Lydia!"

Jackson stepped forward, sticking his chest out. "Ben, you need to go. Now!"

"Lydia! Lydia!" Ben called her name, over and over, as if he were a madman. He needed to speak to Lydia. He needed to say goodbye, to know that she understood.

And he needed to tell her that he loved her. He loved her with every fiber of his being.

"Lydia! Lydia please!"

But she didn't come out. She had to have heard him, but she

chose not to see him. She thought he was nothing but a cold-blooded murderer. Ben squeezed his hands into fists, the blood boiling within him. Not only had Walter and Moses stripped him of his home and his family, they had stripped him of the only woman he had ever loved. And all because of their no-good brother, who'd hidden his sinful ways from everyone, who'd fooled everyone into thinking he was a decent guy. Who even in his death had fooled everyone into believing Ben was a murderer.

Jackson pulled the gun from his holster. "I don't want to have to use this," he said, his voice eerily calm. "So you need to go. Now."

Ben took one last look at Cobble Cafe, his eyes darting from window to window and over to the door. There was no sign of Lydia. And there wouldn't be, either. She wasn't going to come.

"Alright," Ben said. "I'll leave."

# Chapter 40

Lydia stood to the side of the window, careful to keep herself out of view as she watched Jackson and Ben. Every inch of her body physically ached, as if she had been assaulted and left for dead, but the ache in her heart was the worst. Each beat felt as though it was being sliced with a knife, over and over again.

How could it be? How could sweet Ben be a murderer? Lydia watched him carefully, studying his face. As he spoke with Jackson, Ben didn't seem angry, as she thought a murderer would be. He seemed anguished, distressed. Worry and sadness were etched in his wrinkled brow. Lydia longed to rush to him, to comfort him.

But she couldn't. This wasn't just about her own safety but her family's as well. Ben was a murderer. He had fooled her once, and she wasn't going to let him fool her again. If those two men had come all the way from Texas in search of Ben, then it had to be real. Ben had murdered their brother, and Lydia didn't want any association with it.

After talking with Jackson, Ben turned around, his head hung, and headed back toward the woods. A lump filled Lydia's throat, making it difficult to swallow. Would Ben try again to see her, to put her family in harm's way? Or was this it? Was this to be the last time she saw him? They had been strangers only a few weeks earlier, and now they were to become strangers once more.

Jackson waited until Ben had disappeared, then returned to the cafe. Betty flung her arms around him as he entered the kitchen. "My hero!" she said with a kiss to his cheek. "First you saved me from that kidnapper, and now you save my sister. Bravest man I know right here."

Jackson smiled, his dimple growing deep. "I'd do anything for you two ladies."

"Thank you, Jackson," Lydia said, her voice quivering.

Betty rubbed Lydia's arm. "I'm sure this is tough. But you did the right thing."

Lydia glanced out the window, where Ben had stood only a few minutes earlier. For a moment, Lydia thought she saw him again,



coming her way, his face full of love for her. But it was only her imagination. Ben was gone. She would never again feel the warmth of his body as he bundled her into his arms, never again feel his lips pressed against hers.

It was for the best that she never saw him again, Lydia told herself. He was a murderer, and she was a God-fearing woman. There wasn't anything to consider.

"He fooled all of us," Betty said, as if reading Lydia's mind.

"Yes," Lydia said, breathing out a long sigh. "Yes, he most certainly did."

# Chapter 41

The wind whistled in Ben's ears as Bullet's hooves thundered against the ground. Bullet's muscles surged beneath Ben, taking them fast across the open land, their bodies merged as one. Like the other towns along the way that Ben had left, Coyote Pass was now far behind him, a short blip in his journey across the West. The other towns were nothing but hazy memories now, and soon Coyote Pass would be the same.

Except, this time he was leaving behind his heart. This time, there would be one memory he would never forget, surged into his mind like a cattle brand.

She hadn't even wanted to see him. Ben tried to make excuses for Lydia. Maybe her father had banished her from going out; maybe Jackson had insisted she stay inside. But no. Although Lydia was easygoing and a pleaser, she was a strong-willed woman when the situation called for it. If she had wanted to see him, she would have found a way. So the fact that she hadn't come out meant only one thing: she hadn't wanted to see him.

Oh what Lydia must think of him. She probably thought of him as they now did in his hometown: that he was a heartless, ruthless, cold-blooded murderer, needlessly robbing a woman of her loving husband and children of their devoted father. Never mind that it wasn't true. Never mind that Jake Ward was a drunken womanizer who'd fooled them all into believing he was a godly man of upstanding character. People knew that Jake was dead because of Ben, and that was all they thought they needed to know.

While Ben had always known he'd eventually have to leave Coyote Pass, he'd never pictured it like this. Never imagined there would be no goodbye between him and Lydia, no sense of closure. He'd wanted to reassure her that he cared about her, that he valued their relationship. To let go of her gently. Not like this. Like this, it was as though he'd had his chest sliced open, his heart ripped out.

But there was no point staying behind if Lydia wouldn't talk to him. If he did, Walter and Moses would find him, and soon he would be dead.

Bullet hadn't had a break in awhile, so Ben slowed Bullet down and led him to the river's edge. The river flowed stronger here than it did by Coyote Pass, lapping over a handful of boulders that were near the shore. A frog hopped along the shoreline, and a blue jay whooshed by. In the distance, Ben spotted a lone panner, bent over as he worked in the blazing sun.

Ben sat on the ground as Bullet lapped up the water. He gathered a few small pebbles around him and tossed them into the river, one by one, watching as they disappeared into the dark, murky water. Anything to try to distract him from his thoughts, from the ache in his heart over never seeing Lydia again. But try as he might, Ben couldn't get the image of Lydia out of his mind. He pictured her working in the cafe, the amazing way she could load up her arms with plates of steaming food, a smile stretched across her beautiful face as she served her guests. He pictured her atop Bullet, determination and grit in her eyes as she clung to his reins. He pictured her as she stood before him the first time they kissed, so innocent and vulnerable, as if she was willing to offer him her entire world.

What a life they could have had if it wasn't for Walter and Moses. How pleasant life in Coyote Pass would have been if it weren't for them. Working during the day making furniture, then coming home at night to his wife and children wrapping themselves around his legs in their excitement to see him.

Ben stood, stretching his arms and legs. He ought to get going, needed to keep moving. Walter and Moses would find out he had been there and fled soon enough, and Ben wanted to put a good distance between them before they did. Ben rubbed Bullet's muzzle, then hopped on. "At least I have you, boy."

Because Bullet was the only one he would ever have.

## Chapter 42

Each step on the way home took conscious effort, as if Lydia's shoes were filled with bricks, weighing her down. She wasn't sure how she made it through the day, how she remembered what her customers needed or who had ordered what. She wasn't sure how she managed to smile, to pretend that everything was okay when her heart was shattered in a million pieces. Lydia dragged behind her parents, physically unable to keep up.

"Lydia?" her mother called out, holding a lantern up high. "Are you still coming?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Hurry up, dear," Mother said.

"She's had a rough day," Father said to Mother.

A *rough day*? Lydia thought. A rough day would have been if she had spilled scalding stew on her customers or torn her dress or lost a favorite book. A rough day wasn't watching the man you love leave forever without saying goodbye, without closure. A rough day wasn't trying to convince your heart that the man you love was a murderer and that everything you love about him was a lie. A rough day wasn't having all your dreams on the verge of coming true only to have them ripped away.

She had thought she had known *rough*. It had been rough to tell Andrew that she was leaving and for him to respond so nonchalantly. It had been rough to leave her home, knowing she would never again see her family and friends. It had been rough enduring months at sea as they sailed around Cape Horn and up to California. It had been rough settling in a newly-established mining town, starting a business, and forging a new life out of practically nothing.

But none of that was rough in comparison to what Lydia was dealing with then. How did she accept the fact that she had fallen in love with someone who took the life of another human being? How did she accept that she had spent time with someone who could have snapped and done the same to her—or to her family? And how did she make her heart stop loving him, no matter what

her head told her?

And even though it was ridiculous, even though it shouldn't matter if Ben was caught and faced the justice he deserved, she worried about him, too. What were those men planning to do if—or when—they did find Ben? The thought of Ben dead, laying in a pool of blood... oh it was all too much to bear. Too much to bear.

When they arrived home, Lydia shuffled through the door, her head downcast. She couldn't bring herself to meet her parents' eyes, to allow them to see her shame and humiliation, even though they had been deceived by Ben, too. But she was the one who had spent significant amounts of time with him; she was the one who hadn't even for a second suspected Ben capable of doing such a thing. She was the one who had been the fool. She wished they didn't know, wished they just thought that Ben had no interest in her and left. But she'd been forced to tell, forced to involve them, because their safety was at risk.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Mother asked.

Lydia shook her head as she lit a candle. "No," she said, trying to keep her voice from cracking. "I just want to go to bed." Lydia dragged herself up the stairs and to her room.

"We shouldn't have pushed her toward him," Father said. His voice was a whisper, but Lydia could still hear.

"Don't blame yourself," Mother said. "We all thought Ben was wonderful."

"But I'm the one who arranged for Ben to work with Lydia on the furniture. I'm the one who kept insisting she go check on it. I put our own daughter in danger." There was pain in Father's voice, a guilt Lydia was sure he felt deep in his bones.

Lydia wished she could comfort him, but she had no strength to do so. She dressed in her nightgown, then walked over to her open window. The night air was still warm, but a gentle breeze blew in, cooling her stuffy room ever so slightly and causing the light from her candle to dance on the walls. Save for a sprinkling of stars across the sky, there was nothing but darkness out her window.

Darkness like her heart.

If only they had never come to this forsaken place, Lydia thought. If only she was still back in Philadelphia. Then she would have never met Ben, never would have had her heart shattered the way it was.

And yet, despite it all, Lydia missed Ben. She hated knowing

that she would never see his smile, that heart-shaped birthmark. She hated knowing that he would never take her in his arms or kiss her lips. She hated knowing they would never ride Bullet together again, that the wind would never again whip against her face as she clung tight to Ben's waist.

Lydia tried to picture Ben in the moments before taking a man's life. She tried to picture him with his gun drawn, his eyes blazing in a deep, evil hatred that only a murderer would have. But she couldn't. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't picture Ben like that. He was so patient with her, whether she was falling in the dirt or learning to ride a horse. He had such a gentle spirit.

Lydia's breath rushed out in a moan. How could she get through the next day or the one after that or the one after that? How could she get herself to stop loving Ben?

The weight of Lydia's eyelids grew heavy. She hadn't slept much, if at all, the night before. Her body was weary, both from the physical work of her job and the heavy burden carried by her heart. Lydia blew out her candle and lay down in her bed.

# Chapter 43

The worst part of it all was not getting to speak to Lydia. There'd been no chance for Ben to explain his side of the story, to explain that he wasn't the monster she must have assumed him to be. And there'd been no chance to tell her that he loved her.

It hurt, worse than any other feeling Ben had ever experienced before. The pain of separation from Lydia seeped deep down into his bones, filling them with poison. Each pump of his heart ached; each breath he took pierced his lungs like little daggers. Being with her allowed him to see life in a different light. She'd given him hope, filled him with joy. But all of that had been taken away with Walter and Moses's arrival, all of that had been stripped from him, as if his own flesh had been ripped off his body.

If only his life had been different. If only he hadn't taken the path that he had that fateful night, cutting through Farmer McGregor's property. He'd never done that before, so why that night? Why the night that Jake Ward would be there, the moment he was about to harm that woman? If only Ben had simply gone the other way, around the McGregor's land. Then Ben would never have been forced to take Jake's life, never would have had to be on the run.

But then... Ben never would have met Lydia.

Ben couldn't allow himself to think that way. He pictured the woman, her eyes opened wide in fear. Real fear. Ben had never seen fear like that, never seen what it was like to be on the verge of serious harm. Her whole body had trembled, like a small animal captured by its predator. There had been no choice for Ben but to do what any real man would do. If only Jake had simply let her go, if only he hadn't drawn his gun, if only he hadn't been so drunk... there were so many *if onlys*.

Ben gazed out across the river, the light of the moon reflecting in its waters. The river was wider at this point, its current much faster. And no matter what happened to it, its flow never stopped, always onward, moving forward toward a great unknown. A large oak passed by, and Ben noted the strength the water had; even a

tree thrown at it did nothing to deter its steady movement. Ben needed to be strong, strong like the river.

He would fight for her love, Ben decided right then and there. He would be tenacious like the unchanging river, able to stand no matter what was thrown at it.

But first, he had to get Lydia to talk to him. Alone. Where they went from there... well, only time would tell.

Ben pulled out a sheet of paper from his bag. *Dearest Lydia*, Ben wrote. *Things are not as I am sure you have been led to believe. I should have told you everything a long time ago. I promise I am not a monster. All I ask is that you give me a chance to explain. Please meet me tonight after dark at my workshop in the woods. Love, Ben.* Ben stared at the paper. It had been a long time since he'd written, and Ben was sure half the words were spelled incorrectly. But there was something missing, something that his message lacked. He bit his lip, hesitating. But what did he have to lose? *My life isn't whole without you in it*, he added.

Ben stood and brushed the dirt off his trousers. He nuzzled Bullet's face. It would be a long ride back to Coyote Pass, but Bullet was used to traveling lengthy distances late at night. There was the risk of danger, too, if caught by Walter and Moses. But it was worth the risk for Lydia. His life wasn't whole without her. Ben hopped onto Bullet and gave a squeeze with his legs. "Let's go, boy," he said. "Let's go win back the love of my life."



\* \* \*

Ben slowed Bullet as Lydia's home came into view. It had taken him all night to get back to Coyote Pass, and although Ben didn't know the exact time, he knew it wouldn't be long until an orange glow filled the sky. He didn't have an exact plan, but he needed to get the letter somewhere where Lydia would see it, and Lydia alone.



Ben hopped off Bullet and quietly made his way toward the home, careful to not break twigs or crunch leaves with each step. He didn't want to wake any of the Cobbles, especially Mr. Cobble, who might be quick to grab his gun, thinking it was an intruder.

Ben's eyes darted around the home. He'd never been inside before and wasn't sure of the layout, but Lydia had told him that there was a single bedroom upstairs, one that she had shared with her sister until her recent marriage. Ben's eyes fell upon an open window on the second floor. Lydia's bedroom window perhaps? Below the window was a wooden awning. If Ben could get himself onto the awning, then he could figure out where to put the letter.

A large oak tree loomed nearby, its branches bowing down toward the awning. Ben scurried up the tree, then lowered himself onto the awning. A twig snapped in his hand, sending Ben down with a thud. Ben froze, the air in his lungs vanishing. For a moment he didn't move, didn't breathe, his heartbeat pumping in his ears. When no sound came from inside, Ben continued forward until he reached the edge of the window.

It was Lydia's room, and there she was, her luscious brown hair splayed across her pillow, lit by the moonlight. Her lips were a soft pink, as if she had dusted them with the petal of a rose before bed, and every inch of Ben's fiber longed to kiss them. Ben imagined her as his wife, laying next to her each night, watching in awe the gentle rise and fall of her chest while she slept, grateful that a woman like Lydia was his.

From outside the window sill, Ben searched for a spot where he could put the letter. The room was rather sparse—a bed, a small nightstand, and a wooden chair. A dress was spread out across the chair, perhaps in preparation for that day. That was the best option, Ben decided. If that was her dress for the day, then surely she would see the letter.

Ben breathed in deep, filling his lungs to capacity. He wouldn't let himself think about what would happen if he got caught, how he would explain himself. Or if he would even be given the chance to explain himself. And what would Lydia think, knowing he had been there, inside her room? But it was the only way. She wouldn't speak to him otherwise. And even with the letter, he had no guarantee that Lydia would come. But this was the only way; this was the risk Ben would have to take.

As quietly as possible, Ben slipped inside Lydia's room. The

wood creaked beneath him as he stepped down. Ben froze once again, his heart rattling inside him, but Lydia didn't move. Ben tiptoed over to the chair, placing the letter on top of her dress, then tiptoed back to the window and out onto the awning. When he was back on the ground, Ben sprinted to Bullet.

"Let's get out of here," Ben said. He jumped onto Bullet, praying his letter would work.

# Chapter 44

The letter was in her dress pocket, but Lydia could feel its presence, as if it burned against her skin as hot as the fire in the blacksmith forge. She'd read the letter so many times she had it memorized. *Give me a chance to explain. My life isn't whole without you in it.* The words made her so dizzy, so confused. They weren't the words of a murderer, but of a loving man who wanted to win her affection.

But he was a murderer, no matter how many nice words he wrote. How could he be trusted?

"You doing all right?" Betty asked, her voice thick with concern.

Lydia had caught her reflection earlier and knew why her sister asked. There were large bags under her eyes, and her face was as pale as the sugar Sarah used in her shortbread cookies. She looked as if she had seen death itself, as if she were a walking corpse. But although she loved Betty, Lydia couldn't tell her sister about the letter. Not yet anyway. She needed to make the decision of whether she would meet Ben for herself, without outside influence. And if she did decide to go—a big *if*—Lydia didn't want anyone to try and stop her.

"It's been a tough few days," Lydia said.

Betty squeezed Lydia's arm. "I know. I don't know how you are functioning here."

"Neither do I."

Lydia gathered the plates of scrambled eggs and potatoes. Though something she had done six days a week for the last couple years, her arms wobbled, as if they might give out. Lydia realized she had eaten almost nothing since learning about Ben's past, and her body was close to fainting.

"Have you eaten?" Betty asked, as if reading Lydia's mind.

"Not today," Lydia said.

Betty took the plates from her sister and loaded up her own arms. "I'll take these out. Father, we're going to need an extra plate of eggs. Lydia is going to eat one of them."

Mother placed her hand on Lydia's forehead. "Are you feeling

well, dear?"

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine," Mother said. "But are you getting sick, too?"

"I'm fine," Lydia repeated through clenched teeth.

"You need to eat." Mother handed a plate of eggs and potatoes to Lydia.

Lydia snatched the plate and stomped off to a quieter part of the kitchen. Her emotions swirled within her, pain mixed with love mixed with fear. Ben hadn't left town, after all, and now he wanted to meet her. At night. Why at night? Was he planning to do something devious to her? Had he lured his victim in the same way, promising a payment or something if he met him at dark? Or was it something innocent, a way of protecting both himself and Lydia from those two men who were searching for him?

Lydia didn't want to think about what would happen to Ben if the two men found him before she'd had a chance to talk with him. Or worse, if they found him while she was with him. It was dangerous, too dangerous. Ben was a murderer. And the only reason two men would follow him all the way from Texas out to California was to take care of Ben in a way that made Lydia sick to her stomach.

Oh what to do? Lydia's head told her she should have nothing to do with Ben. He was a murderer, plain and simple. There was nothing for him to explain, no words that could justify the shedding of another's blood. But her heart... Her heart told her to give him a chance. To at least hear him out. The last couple days had been miserable, miserable without Ben. He had given life and hope to her in a way she had never dreamed possible. Without Ben, Lydia was nothing more than a shell walking around, fumbling through her day as if she was blind.

Lydia glanced behind her. Her mother and father had their backs to her, working at preparing the food, and Betty wasn't back yet. Lydia hurried to pull the letter out and read it once more, making sure it was real, making sure her mind hadn't invented everything. But yes, there it was, the words written by Ben's hand. She read it a second time, then slipped the letter back into her pocket.

To think, Ben must have come into her room at night to make sure the letter was somewhere she could see it. There was a part of her that was creeped out at this thought, that someone had entered

her room and she hadn't woken up. But if Ben wanted to harm her, wouldn't he have done it then? Instead, he'd risked everything, risked getting caught, perhaps even killed, to find a way to get this message to Lydia. Seeing her was *that* important to him. Lydia's heart swelled at the thought, and that familiar love for him returned, overpowering her doubts.

Maybe he did have some good explanation for what had happened in Texas. Maybe there was more to the story than his victim's brothers knew. Maybe Lydia would be the first person who'd ever give him a chance to share what happened.

Lydia popped the last bite of potatoes in her mouth. She would meet him, she decided.

But first, she had to figure out how.



\* \* \*

It was implausible that Father would ever approve of Lydia meeting Ben, and certainly not late at night. Lydia never left the home after dark, not even to visit Sarah; any excuse that she might come up with would look suspicious. That left only one option: she would have to sneak out.

Lydia paced her room as she waited for the time to pass. Her heart thudded in her chest. She couldn't believe she was going to do this. An internal battle continued to rage inside her, filling her with doubts. Could Ben be trusted, after doing such a horrendous act? Maybe she shouldn't go. But then, if she didn't, would she regret the decision for the rest of her life? After all Ben had done for her, didn't she owe it to him to at least hear his side of the story?

Lydia cracked open her door, listening. The sound of her father's gentle snore drifted to her ears. It was time to go.

Going out the front door would be sure to wake her parents, especially Father, who was a fairly light sleeper. The front door

creaked, and its fit was tight, scraping the wood as one pulled it shut. The only other means of leaving was the window. She would have to crawl on the awning, then figure out a way off. Lydia walked over to the window and hesitated. With a single nod of her head, she placed a leg through the window. She was going to do this.

Lydia stumbled out the window and onto the awning. What a klutz, she thought to herself. A light breeze blew, but otherwise the night was still warm, leftover heat from the summer sun. In the distance, a coyote howled, and an owl hooted in a nearby tree. Lydia carefully stepped her way across the uneven awning, holding the skirt of her dress up as she did. When she got to the end, she stopped, not sure how she would get off.

She had two choices. She could try to pull herself up onto the branch of a nearby oak tree, make her way across the branch, and then down the oak tree. But doing so would require a lot of arm strength to pull her body up so high, and Lydia doubted she had the needed muscles. That left her with the only other option, to lower herself onto the post that supported the awning and slide down.

Lydia lowered herself onto her stomach, thankful no one could see her. She inched her way closer to the post. Heights didn't scare her, per se, but she wasn't fond of them either. It wasn't that high, she tried to reassure herself. It would all be over quick. Lydia leaned forward, reaching for the post. But she leaned too far, and in an instant a falling sensation rushed over Lydia. The earth was coming at her, quick. Lydia let out a scream, then crashed into the ground with a thud.

"Lydia! Lydia! Are you all right?" It was her Father's voice, but Lydia was too confused, her brain too foggy, to know how to answer. Only one thought filled her head: Ben. She had to get to Ben, before he left her forever.

"Oh goodness!" Mother's voice now. "Lydia! What happened? Can you move?"

Pain radiated through every inch of Lydia's body. "I—I'm not sure," she said, her voice a whisper.

"Oh Lydia!" Mother was on her knees beside her, running her hands over Lydia's arms, neck, and legs. "Is anything broken? Nothing feels broken."

"And exactly how would you know if something feels broken?" Father's voice was gruff, but Lydia knew he was worried, like her

mother.

Mother grunted. "I think I can tell if a bone is sticking out funny."

Lydia lifted her head, ever slowly. Her face was covered in dirt, and she could taste it in her mouth. "I don't think anything is broken," she said, though she wasn't one-hundred percent sure.

"Do you think you can stand so we can get you inside?" Father asked. "Or should we carry you?"

"I'll stand." Lydia had to stand; she would need to stand to get to Ben, before it was too late. Father wrapped his arms around Lydia and lifted her. Lydia winced, the pain making it difficult to breathe.

"It's too soon," Mother said. "We shouldn't have lifted her so soon."

"I'm okay," Lydia said, but even speaking was difficult.

"Let's get her inside. She can lay down in our bed," Father said.

Lydia tried to nod, but even that hurt too much. There wasn't a part of her body that wasn't screaming in pain, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. But worst of all was the pain in her heart, the fear that she'd never see Ben again, never hear his side of the story. If only she had gone out with Jackson to talk to him. If only she'd been stronger; if only she'd insisted. Now, she'd never get to see Ben again, never get any sense of closure.

Mother came alongside Lydia, and Lydia wrapped her right arm around her mother's shoulder and her left arm around her father's waist. Her face grimaced as she took a tiny step forward, then another. After several minutes they made it to the front door; after another several minutes they made it to her parents' bedroom. With her parents' assistance, Lydia lowered herself into their bed.

Once she was settled, Father wove his arms tightly across his chest. His forehead wrinkled, and his eyebrows dipped into a deep V. "Now Lydia. Help me understand what happened."

Lydia closed her eyes, her head throbbing. She hated to lie to her parents, but what other choice did she have? She couldn't tell them about Ben, couldn't put him at risk. "There was a baby squirrel," Lydia said, the first excuse that popped into her head. "I thought... I thought he was sick."

Father and Mother exchanged glances. "You climbed out your window and onto the awning to chase after a baby squirrel?" Father's tone was filled with doubt.

“Mm-hmm.” Lydia tried to nod, but the pain was too great, causing her to moan.

“You’ve always had a good heart, even for animals.” Mother took Lydia’s hand in hers and patted it gently. “Let’s let her be. She’s had a rough night.”

“Fine,” Father grumbled. “But don’t do something so foolish again.”

“No,” Lydia said.

“Perhaps I should sleep in here with you,” Mother said.

Having her mother there was the last thing Lydia wanted. Lydia’s emotions raged inside her, like a dam about to burst, and she needed to process those feelings alone. “I’ll be fine. I just—I just want to go to sleep.”

“Very well,” Mother said. “But holler if you need anything.”

“I will.”

“Good night, dear.” Mother kissed Lydia’s forehead.

“Good night.” Father shut the door behind him and Mother.

As soon as they were gone, tears sprang to Lydia’s eyes. Her body ached, as if every inch of her had been bludgeoned by a hammer, but it was the ache in her heart that hurt the most. If she didn’t show up that night, Ben would assume she wanted nothing to do with him. And she hadn’t, at first. But she never stopped loving him, and the more Lydia had thought about everything, the more she realized she needed to at least hear him out. To at least give him a chance to explain.

But now she would never be able to. She pictured him waiting for her in his outdoor workshop, pacing as he anticipated her arrival, giving up when she didn’t show. Hopping onto Bullet and riding off, away from Coyote Pass, never to be seen again.

Lydia tried to move, but the pain was too intense. She’d never be able to get to him like this. The tears trickled down her cheek, one at a time, until they burst free. They rushed down her face like a river during a rainstorm, wild and uncontrolled. She hadn’t cried since learning Ben had murdered someone, but now the emotions were set free. She cried for everything she had lost, the nothingness that her life would become without the hope of love. Before, she hadn’t realized how much she needed love in her life, but Ben had shown her how much she did, how much better life was with someone by her side. Ben had given her a reason to hope, a reason to believe life could be sweet and wonderful.



And then in an instant, everything had been taken away.

Lydia cried and cried, big, heaping sobs, until finally she could cry no more.

## Chapter 45

Ben paced back and forth, the twigs cracking beneath his boots as he walked. He hadn't eaten all day, but still his stomach coiled within him, turning and twisting into knots, as if he'd digested a spoiled piece of meat. Would she come? She hadn't wanted to come out and speak to him earlier at the restaurant. Ben could only pray that was because of her family's influence, that if she saw how much he cared for her—how much he *loved* her—then maybe she would come and give him a chance to explain.

And where would they go from there? That Ben didn't know. There wasn't really anywhere they could go, wasn't any way they could be together that was fair to Lydia. But right then, all Ben knew was that he needed to see Lydia. He needed to see the way her dark eyes gazed into his, needed to see the way her soft lips turned up into a smile just for him. He needed to know that she didn't despise him, didn't think of him as the worst type of man. And he needed her to know how deep his feelings ran for her, how much joy she brought to his life.

The reality was, though, that Lydia might not come. In fact, if Ben gambled on the options, he'd be forced to place his wager on Lydia not coming. Jackson had made it clear that the Cobble family didn't want anything to do with him, with a murderer. Who knew what Lydia had heard, what inaccurate information Walter and Moses had said that was then passed around town. Of course, Ben couldn't blame Lydia. If she believed he was a murderer, then understandably she wouldn't want to be with him. Why, she might even be downright scared of him.

Ben heard a rustling sound, and he halted in his tracks, his ears perked up. It could be Lydia, but it could also be Walter and Moses. If it was Lydia, Ben didn't want to scare her by having his gun drawn, but he also wanted to have it ready should it be Walter and Moses. His hand hovered over it, prepared to draw in a second's notice. But it turned out to be neither Lydia nor Walter and Moses, just a raccoon moseying about.

Ben continued his pacing. He knew it wasn't safe for him to be

back in Coyote Pass, wasn't safe to be so close to where Walter and Moses were, hunting him down. But he had to take this risk, for Lydia's sake. He couldn't live without a proper goodbye, couldn't live with her thinking he was a ruthless murderer. His body was physically exhausted from everything, especially the lack of sleep, but his mind kept him going.

The night continued on, the soft hoot of a nearby owl the only sound. The teensy bit of hope that Ben arrived with started to fade. Maybe she hadn't seen the letter, Ben tried to reason with himself, but he knew that was impossible. The letter had been in a spot that Lydia couldn't have *not* seen it. If she wasn't there, it was because she made the conscious choice not to come.

The stars started to fade from the night sky. The sun would be up soon, welcoming a new day. Ben inhaled deeply, swelling his lungs, then let the air eke out in a moan. She wasn't coming. She didn't love him. His heart felt as though it had been ripped from his chest, replaced by a stone.

But he couldn't blame Lydia. He couldn't blame her at all. He'd had multiple chances to tell her, to confide in her the whole story. She should have learned the truth directly from him. But he'd been too scared the truth would ruin the sweet relationship that had grown between the two of them. He hadn't given her the chance to believe him, to trust that she would see the man he was inside, the man who had been doing good and not evil.

It was over. He ought to get out of there, away from Coyote Pass, away from Walter and Moses. Ben glanced around his makeshift workstation, his tables and chairs covered by tarps. It pained him that he wouldn't be able to fulfill what he had promised to do, that he wouldn't even be able to deliver what he had finished. At least Lydia knew where they were and someone could come pick them up. Still. It didn't sit well with Ben. That wasn't the type of person he was, someone who only partially completed a job and then bailed. But what choice did he have? Walter and Moses were on the hunt for him, and they would surely kill him if they found him. Ben could hardly be traipsing about town renting a cart and dragging furniture to Cobble Cafe.

"At least I have you." Ben nuzzled his face against Bullet's long snout, then hopped on his horse. "Let's go, boy."

Bullet walked a short distance. Ben's eyes drifted down, his eyelids as heavy as logs. He hadn't slept in so long. His body was so

tired. His head snapped in a jerk; he'd almost fallen asleep. There was no way he could continue like this. Ben tightened the reins and nudged Bullet to a stop. He dismounted Bullet and slumped against a tree. Sleep arrived in an instant, dragging him into a dark world with no light, a world with no Lydia.

## Chapter 46

Lydia woke up with a start. The sun shone through the open window, bright and brilliant, making Lydia squint. It had to be late if the sun was already so high, at least nine or ten. Why hadn't her parents woken her? With more and more miners arriving every week to Coyote Pass, the cafe had been busier than ever in the mornings. Betty had to be going crazy without her there to help. Lydia tossed off the light blanket, but even that simple movement brought the pain rushing back to her. Lydia could barely move.

But Ben. Oh Ben. He probably assumed that she wanted nothing more to do with him, was probably long gone from Coyote Pass by then. The pain of that thought made each inhale of her breath pierce her lungs, like shards of broken glass. Oh why hadn't she given him a chance to explain when he'd come to her at the restaurant? She had been a coward, actually afraid he might snap and murder her. If anyone should be upset, it was Ben, upset at her for not giving him a chance after all that he had done for her. The whole time she had known him, Lydia had sensed there was a burden he'd carried. And instead of being there for him when he needed her most, she'd run away.

She had to get to him. She had to see if he was still there, if there was any chance, minuscule as it would be, that he had waited.

Lydia inched her way to the edge of the bed, every part of her body screaming in pain. But even in the pain, she could at least move, which was more than she could do the night before. It took every effort she could muster, but Lydia swung her legs off the bed and forced herself into a standing position. The pain made her dizzy, causing the room to spin around her. She bit her lip, focusing. Her father's cane from when he threw out his back earlier in the year rested against the wall near the bedpost. Slowly, Lydia shuffled over to the cane. She could do this.

As Lydia stepped outside, she was smacked by the hot summer air, greeting her like the warmth of an open oven. Almost immediately, sweat percolated under her corset. This was not going

to be easy, but she had to do this. Lydia took a step forward and then another, relying heavily on her father's cane for support. The amount of energy she had to muster each time she lifted her foot was enough to leave her panting after only a few feet. Lydia paused, leaning on the cane, gathering the strength to continue on.

Little chance remained that Ben hadn't left by then. But still, Lydia needed to do this, needed to make sure. The pain didn't matter. The fact that she'd slept in her dress and hadn't even combed her hair didn't matter. Nothing mattered except finding Ben. And so Lydia continued on, pausing frequently, wiping the sweat from her brow with a handkerchief she found in her dress pocket. She made her way through the woods, passing squirrels and chipmunks and three deer nibbling on low hanging leaves. Lydia barely noticed any of them; her focus was on getting to Ben.

The sun was directly overhead by the time Lydia neared Ben's makeshift workshop. It was only a little bit further, hidden by a few large oaks and manzanita trees. Lydia paused, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. She didn't hear anything like the times before, didn't hear the sounds of wood being sawed or nails being hammered. But of course she wouldn't. Now that he was being searched for by those two men, Ben would be doing everything he could to be quiet, to keep a low profile. But... would he even still be there? Was he sitting in silence, waiting for her to arrive? Certainly he wouldn't expect her to come at this time of the day, during the busy mealtime hour at the cafe. Lydia could only pray he was there, pray he had sensed she would come.

Lydia made her way over to the work area. "Ben?" Lydia called out. "Ben? Are you there?" The only answer was the chirp of a blue jay, the snap of a twig under her shoe. Lydia passed the trees and into Ben's workstation. The tables and chairs he'd crafted were still there, covered in tarps, along with the crates and boards he'd used as a table for sawing and measuring. It was as if nothing had happened, as if he'd only gone to grab a bite to eat or head into town for supplies. But Lydia knew that wasn't the case. Her heart dropped to her feet like an anchor tossed into the ocean. Ben was gone.

Lydia lifted one of the tarps and ran her fingers along the curved back of the chair. Ben had formed this with his hands, those same hands that had held her so tight. Those same hands that she would never feel again. "Oh Ben," Lydia whispered. Her eyes welled with

tears, and Lydia let them pour out, covering her cheeks like a rainstorm. She slumped onto the ground, her body exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Lydia's shoulders lowered and fell as she sobbed, her raging emotions in complete control. She had to be a sight, but what did it matter? There was no one to see her, no one who would ever be able to comfort her.

She had let him go. The man she had fallen in love with. She hadn't even given him a chance to explain. Oh what Ben must think of her, that she had so easily turned her back on him!

"Oh Ben!" Lydia cried again, louder this time, her voice echoing in the woods.

# Chapter 47

The shriek of a woman's cry yanked Ben from his sleep. Ben's eyes popped open, and he glanced around him, confused where he was. Bullet stood nearby, waiting patiently. He was sitting on the dirt, leaning against a tree. His neck and back were stiff. And then it came rushing back to him, his stomach filling with rocks: Lydia had never come.

Ben jumped up. There was someone nearby, a woman. Who would be so far into the woods, and a woman at that? He followed the sound, back toward his workstation. As the woman came into view, Ben stopped. He rubbed his eyes, sure that they were deceiving him, sure that he must still be dreaming. But no, it was real. She was real.

It was Lydia!

Ben rushed over, his feet flying underneath him, his heart soaring. He told himself he had to keep his emotions in check. Just because she was there didn't mean anything. Maybe she wanted an explanation but nothing more. Maybe she wanted to tell him to stay away from her. Or maybe she had simply come for the furniture, figuring he would be long gone by now. The desire to wrap her in his arms, to reach out and stroke her hair was overwhelming. But Ben didn't know what Lydia thought of him, and it wasn't wise to take any risks. He thrust his hands in his pockets, willing them to stay in place.

"I—I can't believe you're here," Ben said, his voice shaking.

Lydia wiped her face with a handkerchief. Her eyes were red and puffy, as if she had been crying for a while. He had never seen her so emotional before, never seen her so raw and vulnerable. She was always so composed, so put together. "Ben," she said, a smile breaking across her face. Ben relaxed, ever slightly. She was smiling at least.

Ben shook his head, trying to understand. Why had she come now, and not the night before? Of course, maybe she had no way of leaving the home without telling her father. Maybe she had come now because she was on a break from work, although that seemed



odd. Given the position of the sun, Ben figured it had to be around noon, a busy time for the cafe.

Lydia struggled to stand, and Ben noticed she was using a cane to help her. Ben reached out his hand and pulled Lydia up, causing her to wince as she stood. "What's wrong?" Ben asked.

"Oh, um..." Lydia shifted her eyes down. She slipped her hand from Ben's and leaned on her cane. "I, uh, had a little fall last night?"

"A fall?"

Lydia glanced up, gazing right at Ben. Her eyes searched his face, as if she was trying to determine if she could trust him, if he was the person she had believed him to be before she'd found out about his past. Despite her swollen face and puffy eyes, she had never been more beautiful to him than in that moment. She had come; she was giving him a chance. "My father would never have let me meet you last night. So I tried to sneak out, after they went to bed. But... I fell."

Ben pictured the awning outside her window. The same awning he had used to get to her room. Had she...? Ben's hand flew to his mouth, guilt nipping at his heart. He never should have put Lydia in such a position. He should have found another way to meet her, to not risk her getting hurt. "From—from the awning?"

Lydia nodded, her face scrunching in pain as she did. "That's why I couldn't come last night. But I had to try today. I didn't think you'd be here."

"Oh Lydia." Ben's heart swelled with love for her. To think that she had tried to climb down from that awning just to meet him. To think that she had struggled all morning in an effort to meet him, her body suffering in pain from each movement, even though she assumed he would be gone. Ben had never had anyone do such a thing for him.

Ben rushed to Lydia and swept her up in his arms, unable to resist the urge to hold her any longer. She hadn't worn her bonnet, and he buried his face in her mess of hair, breathing in her sweet scent. But there was tension in her body, a tension that had never been there before when he held her, and Ben knew it was from more than the pain. She didn't trust him yet. And Ben couldn't blame her for that. He hadn't been fully honest with her, hadn't told her about his past. The only thing Lydia knew was that Ben had murdered someone. Of course she didn't trust him yet.

Even though it was hard, Ben released Lydia and took a step back. He wanted her to be comfortable, to know that she could trust him. That he wasn't the monster that Walter and Moses made him out to be.

"I came to hear your explanation," Lydia said.

Ben nodded. He'd had so much time to prepare, but the right words escaped him. If he didn't do this right, Lydia would never trust him, would never want to be with him. Nerves inverted his stomach, and his breath harried in his throat. "I'm not sure where to begin," Ben said, running his hand down the side of his face.

"How about the beginning?" Lydia's voice was calm and reassuring, but there was a touch of suspicion woven in.

"Right." Ben inhaled deeply, trying to suck in all the courage he could. "One night, back in Texas, I was headed home from a buddy's house. I took a path I normally don't take, cutting through one of the farmer's properties. Farmer McGregor. I figured it was late, that he wouldn't mind. As I was riding through, I heard the muffled cries of a woman. I hopped off Bullet and went to investigate. And that's when I found them."

Ben shut his eyes, picturing Jake and the woman. He could see them as if they stood before him then, Jake covering the woman's mouth with his hand as she struggled in vain to free herself. Her eyes were wide with fear, a fear that Jake had never seen before, and they pleaded with Ben for help. Jake staggered, clearly drunk, but even in his drunken state he was stronger than the small woman.

"It was a man named Jake, the brother of the two men who are searching for me. He had kidnapped a young woman and dragged her to the cornfield where he was... well, I don't want to think about what he planned to do to her. I told him to let her go, but Jake was too drunk. He pulled out his gun and pointed it back and forth between me and the woman, the whole time screaming that if I didn't leave, he would shoot the both of us."

Ben paused, studying Lydia's face. The only person he'd ever told the whole story to was his mother. He'd been so scared of Lydia's reaction, so scared that she wouldn't believe him. But she stood before him, her head tilted, her brow wrinkled in concern. She believed him. Ben could see it in her eyes, see it in the way she looked at him. Lydia reached her hand out and Ben took it into his own, his skin igniting at her touch.

“Go on,” Lydia said, her voice gentle and reassuring.

“I kept telling Jake to let the woman go, to do the right thing. To think of Millie—his sweet wife—and their kids. But Jake wasn’t having any of it. And then he cocked his gun, pointed right at the woman. I—I had to do something to save her. I didn’t have a choice.”

Lydia squeezed Ben’s hand. “Oh Ben. You did the right thing. You saved that woman’s life. Why, you’re a hero, not a murderer!” A smile crossed Lydia’s face, but then it faded. Lydia cast her eyes down. “I’m so sorry I didn’t give you a chance to explain. I’m so sorry I ever doubted you.”

Ben pulled Lydia to him and embraced her. This time she melted into him, the tension in her body gone. Ben squeezed her, never wanting to let her go, but Lydia winced. For a brief moment, he’d forgotten about her fall, forgotten about the pain she was in. “Sorry!” Ben said, releasing the tightness of his grip but still keeping her in his arms. Oh how wonderful it felt to have the burden of his past released from him, like a boulder being lifted from his chest. For so long he’d carried his secret alone, but now he finally had someone who believed him. Someone who believed that he’d done something good.

“But Ben,” Lydia said. “Why are Jake’s brothers chasing you? Their brother was about to do something heinous. What is there to avenge?”

“The woman took off as soon as Jake was dead. I never got her name, didn’t have any idea who she was. I figured no one had seen me, so I didn’t tell anyone what happened. You see, Jake’s wife was one of the sweetest ladies in Texas. I figured it would have devastated her to know what her husband was really like. He had everyone fooled into believing he was an upstanding, godly man. Jake’s body was found a couple days later, and next thing I know, one of my buddies shows up at my home telling me that Walter and Moses—Jake’s brothers—are coming to kill me. Someone must have seen me leaving Farmer McGregor’s property and pinpointed me for his death. They thought it was cold-blooded murder. So I gathered up a few things, said goodbye to my mother, and left.” Pain stabbed at Ben’s heart as he pictured his mother, the tears streaming down her face as he kissed her cheek for the last time. “I never imagined Walter and Moses would follow me, but they did. Somehow they always find me. They’ve almost caught me twice before. I figure

someone must have ratted me out each time, even though I've never told anyone about Jake. But this blasted birthmark gives me away. I never trust anyone. But I should've trusted you. Oh Lydia, there's no one else like you. I wasn't planning to stay in Coyote Pass long. I always tried to stay two steps ahead of Walter and Moses. But then I met you and I—"

Lydia gazed up at him, her dark eyes expectant. Without giving it a second thought, Ben leaned down and placed his lips on hers, gentle so as to not cause her pain. She tasted like fresh honey, straight from the beehive. Her lips were soft and sweet, and a rush of energy surged through Ben. For a brief moment his troubles vanished; the only thing that mattered in the world was him and Lydia.

"You what?" Lydia said when the kiss ended.

"Hmm?" Ben asked.

"You started saying that then you met me and you... But then you stopped."

Ben laced his fingers through Lydia's hands and brought it to his chest. "And then I met you, and I fell deeply in love. Oh Lydia. I have loved you since the moment we first met."

Lydia giggled. "The first time we met I fell into the dirt."

"Yes, since that moment, and every moment after. Lydia, I love you with all my heart."

"And I—I love you, too," Lydia said.

She loved him. She knew his secret, knew that he had killed another man. And she believed him and loved him still. Hearing Lydia say that she loved him was like a legion of angels singing, and Ben felt like he was being carried away, lifted high above the earth, far away from his problems.

But the reality was far different. The truth was that Walter and Moses were searching for him, hunting him down, and they'd made it clear that nothing would stop them until they found him.

# Chapter 48

It was as if a dam inside her had broken, and all her love for Ben came rushing out. He wasn't a murderer. He was the opposite of a murderer. He had saved that woman's life, and in return, Ben had had his own existence stripped from him, ripped off like the scalp of a traitor. From the minute Lydia had learned about his past, she should have gone to him, given him a chance. What needless pain could have been avoided? Of course, it would have been better if Ben had told her the truth from the beginning, but she couldn't blame him for not doing so, especially based on his previous experiences. Besides, he probably didn't want to put her own life in danger.

But now she had to help him figure this out. There would be no other man like him, and she wasn't about to simply let him go.

"What are we going to do?" Lydia asked.

"We?" Ben rubbed her hand softly with his thumb, sending goosebumps up her arm. "I like the sound of that."

We. Her and Ben. "I like the sound of it, too."

"But I don't know what I'm going to do," Ben said.

"Not you. We," Lydia said. "We're in this together."

"Oh Lydia, sweet Lydia. Walter and Moses are dangerous men. They think they are doing good, though, avenging the death of their brother. And that's what makes them even more dangerous."

"What if we reason with them? Explain to them that this was all a misunderstanding?"

Ben chuckled. "Men like Walter and Moses don't reason with people. They talk with their fists and their guns."

"Well we haven't tried. Maybe if I go to them—"

"Sweetie," Ben said. Lydia liked the way the word rang in her ears, like a little bell. *Sweetie*. "If someone came to you and said that your sister was actually this horrible monster, would you believe him?"

"Well no," Lydia said. "But I know Betty. I know she wouldn't do anything like that."

"And they think they know Jake."

Lydia pursed her lips. Ben did have a point. "But there has to be something we can do." Lydia's voice quivered. True love was within her grasp; she couldn't lose it, either by Ben being forced to escape or Walter and Moses killing him.

"We'll think of something." Ben's voice was confident, but Lydia could see in his eyes that he wasn't so sure. "But for now, I need to get you home. It's not safe here with me. And you need to rest."

Lydia groaned. She didn't want to say goodbye to Ben, and she also didn't want to walk home. A walk that normally took her fifteen to twenty minutes had taken two hours, each step sending pain cascading up her body. As if reading her mind, Ben swooped her up, carrying her in his arms like one might a small child. Lydia let out a laugh, taken by surprise. The beat of Ben's heart beat against her, wild and rapid like her own.

"Wrap your arm around my neck," Ben said.

Lydia did as she was told, pulling herself close to Ben. His body was warm, and she inhaled deeply, breathing in his manly, earthy scent. She imagined herself his new bride, him carrying her to a new home. She imagined a life free of worries, free of those men who were chasing him. She had to come up with something, something that would loosen the shackles that Ben wore around his ankles. She had to come up with something that would allow them to be together, in the open, without fear. Lydia racked her brain as Ben walked, but no good ideas came to her. Other than preemptively killing Walter and Moses—which absolutely wasn't an option, unless it was self-defense—Lydia couldn't come up with anything.

As Lydia's home came into view, her eyes caught sight of another figure heading that way. A lump flew to her throat. It was her father, undoubtedly coming to check on her. This wasn't the time for Father to see her with Ben, wasn't the time to explain everything. But she had no choice. Her father caught sight of them, and he came rushing toward them, at least as fast as he could given his bad back.

"Put her down!" Father shouted. He pulled his gun from his holster. "Kidnapper! Murderer! Put her down this instant!"

"Wait!" Lydia shouted. "He's not kidnapping me. And he's not a murderer!"

Father's eyes darted between Lydia and Ben. "No? Then you have a lot of explaining to do, young lady!" He lowered the gun,

but he kept it in his hand, ready to be used.

Ben set Lydia down, taking his warmth with him. Despite the blazing sun, a chill ran up Lydia's spine. Her father's eyes were narrowed slits. She prayed that Father would believe her, prayed that Father would see that they needed to help Ben. After all, he was the one to push her toward him in the first place.

"Ben is not a murderer," Lydia said. Inside she quivered like a baby mouse in the snow, but she kept her voice steady. "There was a man named Jake, brother of the two men who came to town searching for Ben. This Jake had taken a woman, and her life was in danger. Ben found them, and when Jake cocked and pointed his gun at the woman, refusing to listen to Ben and drop the gun, Ben was left with no choice but to shoot him. So he saved that woman's life. But the brothers don't know the whole story and would never believe it if they were told, and they've been after Ben ever since."

Lydia paused, watching her Father as he processed her words. His lips twitched, but his brow softened. He slipped the gun back into the holster, then folded his arms across his chest. "That true?" Father asked, his eyes boring into Ben.

Ben stood up tall, holding his head up. "Yes, sir," he said, his voice self-assured. Lydia wondered if he felt that way inside, or if in reality he was nervous that another person now knew his secret. A person he didn't know if he could trust. But Father had to know; the only way for her and Ben to be together was if he did.

"So you see, Ben is a hero," Lydia said.

"That's all good and well," Father said. "But how do you expect to be with a man who's on the run? It's too dangerous for you to be with Ben."

"We can't abandon him." Lydia's voice quivered, the forced confidence gone. Her father had to be on her side; he had to! There had to be a way that Ben could escape from Walter and Moses. Without killing them, without always being on the run. And then, an idea popped into Lydia's head. It wouldn't be easy, and there was certain to be risk involved. But it was the only way to free Ben, to give them a chance at togetherness.

"I think I know what to do," Lydia said.

## Chapter 49

Ben's heart thudded against his ribcage, his heartbeat echoing in his ears. Ben had dealt with stampeding herds, dangerous river crossings, and was nearly struck by lightning twice during his cattle herding days, but he'd never been so nervous in his life as he was right then. This time it wasn't just his own life that was at risk, but the lives of his friends and, most importantly, the love of his life. When Lydia had first told him her idea, Ben had thought it was brilliant, but he'd also resisted. It was too dangerous; it put too many people in harm's way. But Lydia had insisted, and finally Ben had relented.

If the plan worked, Ben would finally be free. Free to live his life without constantly looking over his shoulder to see if Walter and Moses were behind him. Free to pick a town—Coyote Pass, of course—to call home and settle down. Free to spend the rest of his life with Lydia, creating a family of their own.

There was one thing, though, that Ben had insisted on against Lydia's wishes. He wanted to be in a spot where he could see what was happening. If things didn't go as planned, if things became too dangerous for their friends, he wanted to be able to emerge, to present himself to Walter and Moses and shift the danger onto himself. Lydia had thought this was too risky, even getting him into town somewhere was too risky, but Ben had insisted. He wasn't going to allow Lydia or any of their friends to put their lives in jeopardy in case things went awry. Lydia had finally relented; what other choice did they have?

And so Ben crouched in a small storage room above the general store where Josiah worked part time. There was a small window, dusty and dirty, but Ben was able to lift it an inch so he could hear what was happening below. Various men arrived, hitching their horses to the posts, leaving a short while later with their supplies. But none of them were his friends; none of them were Walter or Moses.

Ben waited and waited, his apprehension growing. The first part of the plan was that Solomon and Ellis would find Walter and



Moses—Jackson had learned they were staying at Canyon Lodge—and tell them to meet them in front of the general store. Then Jackson and Josiah would come, Jackson riding on Bullet and Josiah carrying one of Ben's shirts, dipped in the blood of a deer. And if they could convince Walter and Moses that this was, indeed, Ben's blood, that he was, indeed, dead? Freedom.

And then, just as Ben was beginning to give up hope, he saw them. Solomon and Ellis first and then Walter and Moses following not far behind. Their skin was darkened by hours in the sun, riding from town to town as they searched for him. They rode on their horses, two large black Morgans whose every step seemed to match the anger of their riders. Walter and Moses towered above most men, and when they hopped off their horses, they stood a head taller than Solomon and Ellis. Ben's heart flew into a frenzy. He hated not being down there, not being a man. But this was the only way to free himself from the brothers without one—or all—of them dead. This was the only way he would be able to have a life with Lydia, to not put her own life in danger.

"This better be good," Walter sneered. He pinned his arms across his chest, and the side of his lip curled up in a snarl.

"I told you it would be, didn't I?" Solomon said. He pleated his arms across his chest, too, matching Walter's stance. Walter might be taller, but it was clear Solomon wasn't about to let him have the upper hand.

Moses pulled a pocket watch from his pants pocket. "We don't have all day. Let's get on with this."

"Patience," Solomon said. "It will be here soon."

A few minutes later, Jackson and Josiah came into view. Jackson was riding Bullet, Josiah walking alongside him, a sugar bag in his hand. They looked cool and confident, as if this was the type of thing they did all the time, as if they didn't have a worry in the world. As if they had just killed a man, and it didn't bother them one bit. Ben prayed silently, his lips quivering as he mouthed the words. *Please let this work. Please let this work.*

Walter and Moses cocked their heads as Jackson and Josiah approached. "What's going on?" Moses asked.

"That fella you were looking for?" Jackson said. "You weren't the only ones."

Walter and Moses exchanged glances. Even from a distance, the doubt and uncertainty on their faces was evident to Ben.

"I told you from the beginning we don't tolerate unscrupulous characters in this town," Solomon said. "Did I not?" Solomon stepped toward Walter and Moses, his head held high. His back was to Ben, but Ben could imagine his face, stern and in control.

Josiah tossed the bag to Walter. Walter opened it and pulled out the shirt. It was still wet from the blood, coloring Walter's hands. "What did he do to you?" Walter asked, his voice full of suspicion.

Josiah laughed. "The better question is, what didn't he do? Cheated in too many games of three-card brag, robbed the general store twice, tried to drag one of the men's wives into the woods. I could go on. Enough was enough."

Air clotted in Ben's lungs; he was afraid to breathe. He'd had a reputation around his hometown as a nice fella. Yes, in Walter's and Moses's minds he'd murdered their brother, but he'd never done any of the types of things Josiah listed. Would Walter and Moses buy it?

"He's gotten worse," Walter said to his brother. He tossed the shirt to the ground, then wiped his bloody hands with the bag.

"What did you expect?" Moses grunted. "He's a murderer, a fugitive on the run."

"And how can you be so sure it was Ben who did all those things?" Walter asked, turning toward Ben's friends again.

Jackson hopped off Bullet, took a step toward Walter and Moses. His face was serious, hard as a stone. If Ben hadn't seen Jackson's usual side, happy and joking around, he'd never believe he was anything but severe. "What do you take us for, fools? That bloke had a stupid heart-shaped birthmark as bright as any moonshine. Gave him away every time."

Walter and Moses chuckled. "Idiot," Moses said.

"We've got enough trouble in this town as it is," Solomon said. "You got what you came here to do. Now it's time to leave."

This was it. Everything rested on this moment. They either bought the story and left, releasing Ben of his shackles, or they didn't, and Ben was still their captive, never to be free again. Ben's stomach churned inside him as he watched the scene unfold below.

"Who made you in charge?" Moses scoffed.

"We're the vigilance committee," Jackson said. "What we say goes. We've told you nicely it's time to leave. If we have to tell you again, it won't be so nice."

"Only if we get the horse," Walter said.

Not Bullet! Not his horse! Ben's only friend for the last few years, Ben's constant companion through this all. From cattle drives to fleeing Texas to crossing the wilderness of the West, Bullet had been through it all with Ben. But... if it meant Lydia... Ben bit his lip hard, so hard that he tasted blood.

Josiah laughed. "You're not getting his horse. We took care of the problem, we get the horse. Now, how many times do we have to tell you? Scam!"

Walter glanced at his brother. "Let's get out of here. We got what we wanted."

"No," Moses said. "I wanted to be the one to pull the trigger. I wanted to watch him squirm in pain as life left him, the way he did to Jake." His voice was vile, filled with deep rage, and a shiver ran up Ben's spine as he realized how much the two brothers hated him. They hadn't just wanted to see him die; they had wanted to see him suffer.

"It's too late for that," Ellis said. "He's already taken care of."

"How did he die?" Moses asked. "At least tell me that."

"Three shots in the chest," Josiah said. He held up his hand, his fingers pointed like a gun. "Pew, pew, pew. It was done."

"Was he in agony? How quick did he die?" Moses asked.

Solomon held up his hands. "Look, fellas. This isn't a negotiation. We take care of problems, and that's it. This is the last time I'm going to repeat myself. You two need to get out of town, now, before you become one of the problems I have to take care of." Solomon patted the pistol in his holster.

"Fine," Walter grumbled. "C'mon. This place is a dump anyway."

Moses spat on the ground, then the two brothers turned their horses around and headed down Main Street. Jackson hopped on Bullet and rode after them.

And then they were out of sight. Gone. Had it really happened? Had it worked? Ben thought he'd feel a boulder lifted off his chest when it was over, but it was still there, still pressing against him, weighing him down. Not until he was sure Walter and Moses were gone, far from town, would Ben be able to breathe again.

Ben leaned against the wall and pulled his knees against his chest. To think, it was Lydia who came up with the idea, Lydia who planned this. It was Lydia who had convinced all their friends that Ben wasn't a murderer, that his only way to freedom was with their

help. It was Lydia who, if this worked, was the reason he would be free. Ben's heart swelled with love. He'd never had anyone do something this big, this monumental for him. If only this would work; if only he could take Lydia in his arms and know that he would never have to let her go again.

Ben waited and waited. The sun was halfway down now; several hours had passed. The small room was stifling hot, and sweat percolated on Ben's forehead and dripped down his back. Ben glanced out the window. Main Street was full of carts and buggies, men riding horses, the usual busyness of the day. His friends were nowhere to be seen. A lump filled Ben's throat, his heart full of worry. Had something happened when Jackson followed Walter and Moses? He hadn't wanted anyone's life to be at risk on account of him; that's why he'd wanted to be able to watch what happened, in case he needed to step in and intervene.

And then there was a sound outside his door, boots clomping up the stairs. Ben jumped up, his heart losing its rhythm as it sputtered out of control. Instinctively, his hand hovered over his gun. He was so used to watching for Walter and Moses, so used to being ready to flee at a moment's notice. If the plan did succeed, it would take a long time for Ben to learn to relax, a long time to not be ready to shoot every time he heard someone coming.

The door flung open, and there stood Jackson. A smile spread across his face, amplifying his dimple. Relief came flooding out of Ben, like a waterfall cascading down the side of a mountain. The boulder was lifted from his chest, the shackles ripped from his heart. He was free!

"It worked!" Jackson said.

"I'm free," Ben said, his voice breathless.

"Yep," Jackson said. "You're free. I followed Walter and Moses for a long time. They won't be bothering you again. Ever."

# Chapter 50

Despite the pain, Lydia paced back and forth in Sarah's kitchen, her feet kicking up dirt with each step. She ought to be working, but Father had insisted that it was too soon after her fall, and he didn't want Walter and Moses going there to look for her should something go wrong with her plan. So she was instructed to stay put at the blacksmith shop, where Calvin would be there to protect her, Sarah there to comfort her. But her mind was going crazy, imagining everything that could go wrong.

"What if they figure out he's not actually dead?" Lydia's fingers toyed absentmindedly with her hair, anxious for something to do.

"We have to have faith," Sarah said. "You've been praying, right?"

"Yes, but what if something goes wrong?" Lydia lamented.

"You've got Solomon, Ellis, Jackson, and Josiah out there. The four manliest men in town, besides Calvin of course. They can hold themselves."

"Yes, but Walter and Moses have guns. A gun can take someone down, no matter how manly the person is."

Sarah placed her hand on Lydia's arm, giving it a soft squeeze. "Everything is going to turn out fine."

Calvin popped his head into the kitchen. "You ladies doing okay?"

"Other than going crazy, just fine," Lydia said.

Calvin patted Lydia's back. "Try to have faith. If anyone can handle this situation, it's Solomon, Ellis, Jackson, and Josiah."

"You sound like your wife," Lydia said.

Calvin and Sarah exchanged glances, little smiles edging at the corner of their mouths. "I'll take that as a compliment," Calvin said.

Sarah pulled a batch of cookies from her oven, the sweet aroma filling the room. Normally such a scent would make Lydia's mouth water, but in that moment, even the thought of food made her stomach churn. "Would you like a cookie once they've cooled? Help take your mind off your worries?"

“Thank you, but I couldn’t,” Lydia said.

Lydia continued to pace the kitchen while Sarah spread out her cookies to cool. The sun was lowering; it had been such a long time since this had begun. Oh what was going on? She wished she could go investigate, but Ben had instructed that she stay put. Besides, Calvin wouldn’t let her leave. So Lydia waited. And waited and waited.

Until finally the back door of the kitchen flung open, and there stood Ben and Jackson. Lydia squealed and rushed over to Ben’s side, ignoring the pain that gripped her body. She flew into Ben’s arms, and he cradled her close to his chest. He held her differently this time, as if he was telling her he would never again let her go. Despite the strength of his arms, his body trembled, ever so softly, as if the weight he had carried for so long had at last come crashing down.

“It worked,” Ben said. “Your idea saved us. They’re gone!”

“Oh Ben,” Lydia said, her voice shaking. The world spun around her, as if she were in a dream. She’d been imagining the worst, imagining Ben dead, but here he was, standing before her. “Is it really true? Are you free?”

“I’m free,” Ben said. “Jackson followed them far out of town to make sure we were rid of them for good.”

“You’re a hero, Jackson,” Lydia said.

Jackson puffed out his chest, a smile spread across his face. “That’s me. Town hero.”

“So tell me everything,” Lydia said.

Ben told her what happened, from Solomon and Ellis convincing Walter and Moses to join them on Main Street, to Josiah and Jackson arriving with Bullet and the bloody shirt.

“And they bought the story?” Lydia asked.

“They had their doubts at first,” Jackson said. “But hey. We’re good. By the end they believed us.”

Lydia glanced up at Ben, his hazel eyes meeting hers. He’d never been more handsome to her than right then, and her heart swelled with love. And then before she knew it, his lips were on hers, pressing harder than he ever had before, his arms clutching her as if he never wanted to let her go. When the kiss ended, Lydia took a step back, dizzy from the exhilaration. Heat whooshed up her neck to her cheeks as her eyes darted between Jackson, Sarah, and Calvin, who had joined the room as well.

Jackson started to clap. "Well done," he said. "Well done!"

Ben took Lydia's hands in his, his thumbs rubbing her skin. Goosebumps tickled her skin; how she loved the feel of Ben's hands, the strength they possessed. "Words can never express how grateful I am to you. You're a genius."

Lydia giggled. "A genius? I like the sound of that!"

Ben's hand grazed her cheek. "You are so beautiful. Oh Lydia, my sweet Lydia. How I love you!"

*I love you.* The words dangled in the air like a soft snowfall, filling Lydia's heart with joy. To think only a short time earlier Lydia had feared Ben was doomed, and now here he was, declaring his love for her. Lydia squeezed Ben's hands, not caring that there was an audience watching them. The only thing that mattered was her and Ben. Ben, who loved her as she loved him.

"I love you, too," Lydia said.

Jackson and Calvin clapped, and Sarah jumped up and down, brushing a tear with the back of her hand.

And right then, Lydia knew she was exactly where she needed to be. In Coyote Pass, the little town that had seemed to hold such little promise when she had arrived, the little town that Lydia had once despised, that she had blamed for taking away everything she had known. But this little town had given her so much. Sarah, her wonderful best friend who stood by her side when she needed it the most. Jackson, her brother-in-law who had risked his life to ensure that the risk for Ben was gone, that he could be free. Josiah, Solomon, and Ellis, fellow townspeople who had become friends, friends who had also risked their lives to help Ben and her out. And most of all, Coyote Pass had given her Ben, a love deeper than Lydia had ever realized was even possible. She had once thought she had lost everything when she had left Philadelphia, but now Lydia understood that she needed to lose it in order to gain so much more.

Ben leaned down and kissed Lydia again. The pain from her fall didn't matter, nothing mattered except Ben. Her Ben.

# Chapter 51

Ben loaded up the cart he had rented from the Landry's livery stable with the tables and chairs. He was halfway done, and it was time to bring what he had to Cobble Cafe. Ben was proud of his work; it was the best he'd ever done. He'd poured his heart and soul into the work, wanting the best not only for Lydia but for her family. His furniture was sure to take the cafe a step up, to a whole new level. To prove that they weren't just a makeshift restaurant. They were an important part of American progress, carving out their place in the West, and they were there to stay.

There was rustling in a nearby manzanita tree. Instinctively, Ben jumped, his hand reaching toward his gun. But then Ben laughed. Sure, there were scoundrels out West, but there were no longer two brothers trying to track him down. He didn't have to grab his gun every time he heard a sound, didn't have to hide out of fear Walter and Moses might have found him. Ben returned to his work, and a moment later a squirrel crossed his path.

It felt good to be free of Walter and Moses, to know that they were long gone. That they believed him to be dead, that they wouldn't search for him any more. Still, it was ingrained into Ben to always be on the lookout, and it was going to take time to adjust to having a normal life again.

Once the cart was loaded, Ben hopped into the driver's seat. "Let's go, boy," Ben said as he gave the reins a snap. Bullet moved forward, slowly, as he dragged the cart over the uneven dirt. After a while, they arrived at Main Street. As Ben passed the saloons and hotels and businesses, he thought about how much he had come to love this little town. True, the men in the saloons might have gotten a little too rowdy, the streets filled with a little too much trash, but Ben didn't notice anymore. Despite only existing for a few years, Coyote Pass offered Ben everything he needed. It offered him friends, a place to finally call home. And most importantly, it offered him the greatest love a man could ever have.

Ben waved at Mr. Boyle, the town gunsmith, as he passed. It was a nice feeling to be able to smile and wave, to not worry if one day



that person might give up his whereabouts to Walter and Moses. He was finally able to live a normal life, much as he had in Texas. Except there weren't any cattle to herd anymore; he'd have to continue to make his living making furniture. And with the town growing the way it was, there would be plenty of business for that. He'd already had requests from Mr. Waterman for the hotel and Mr. Harding for his barbershop. Ben planned to build himself a little shop off Main Street, put his name proudly above the door. There wasn't any reason to hide in the woods anymore.

But before he did that, he'd have to finish the home he was building as a surprise for Lydia. With trying to get the Cobble's furniture done as soon as possible, there hadn't been much time to work on it. But Solomon, Ellis, Josiah, Jackson, and Calvin had all offered to help, and with them the process was going quicker than he'd anticipated. The house ought to be done within the next few weeks. And then he'd ask Lydia to marry him. Ben shook his head, still finding it hard to believe that he was free, that he was able to plan his life. When he arrived in Coyote Pass, he'd expected to stay for a few weeks and then move on to the next town. Never had he imagined he'd be at this point, free and settling down. Making plans to marry.

Yes, it was only a matter of time. Only a matter of time before he and Lydia were husband and wife, waking up next to each other, spending the rest of their lives together as one.

## Chapter 52

The sun was out in full force, and sweat dripped down Lydia's back as she and Sarah walked together after church. Lydia pulled a fan out of her dress pocket, but even the slight air on her face did nothing to cool her down. Lydia tugged at her dress, despising the corsets and undergarments she had on.

"It's so unfair that we have to wear all these things," Lydia complained.

"Indeed," Sarah agreed. She motioned with her hand to a shady spot under an oak tree. "Should we stop here for a bit?"

Anything was better than standing under the scorching sun. "Sounds good to me," Lydia said.

Sarah chatted about a new type of cookie she was planning to sell soon. Lydia half listened, but her mind was far away. For the third week in a row, Ben had hurried off after church instead of giving her a riding lesson, claiming he had *things to do*. What sort of things did he have to do that were more important than spending time with her? Besides stolen moments here and there, Sundays were their only days to spend any actual, quality time together. Lydia worried that Ben was losing interest in her. Now that he was free to pick a town and settle down, maybe he wanted to see what his options were. Maybe he'd changed his mind about making a commitment to her after all. He was incredibly handsome; there were bound to be countless women who would be interested in him.

"You're a million miles away," Sarah said.

"Hmm? Sorry." Lydia sighed. "I'm just worried about Ben, that's all?"

"Worried?" Sarah asked. "What's there to be worried about? He adores you."

"I haven't seen much of him the last couple weeks. I was hoping we'd be able to spend time together today, but instead he went running off again."

"I wouldn't worry about it. He probably just has some things he needs to get done."

Lydia cocked her head. Sarah was clearly trying to keep a straight face, but the corners of her mouth curled up, ever slightly. Was it possible that she knew something, knew what Ben was up to?

“What are you not telling me?” Lydia asked, her hands flying to her hips.

“Me?” Sarah’s hand flew to her chest. “What would *I* know about Ben?”

Sarah tightened her lips, but her cheeks were raised. She was fighting it, fighting a smile. Lydia pointed her finger at Sarah. “You know something.”

“There’s nothing for me to know,” Sarah said. “I only know that Ben loves you, and I wouldn’t worry about anything if I were you.

“How do you know Ben loves me?” Lydia pinned her crossed arms over her chest.

Sarah laughed. “Oh Lydia. It’s clear to anyone how much he adores you. Just the way he looks at you is enough. There’s so much love in his eyes. It’s the same way Calvin looks at me.”

Lydia released a drawn-out exhale. “Then why doesn’t he want to spend time with me lately?”

“Be patient,” Sarah said. “Just give him time.”

There was a twinkle in Sarah’s eye as she spoke, convincing Lydia that Sarah knew more than she let on. But what? It had been two months since the incident with Walter and Moses, two months that Ben had to propose and hadn’t. And now he wasn’t even wanting to spend time with her after church.

Be patient, Sarah had said. Be patient. Lydia supposed she didn’t have any other choice.

# Chapter 53

Ben stood back, admiring the completed work. His new home. The home where he and Lydia would live out their lives together. The home where they would one day welcome children, the home where their love would grow more and more each day. It was a nice home, too, not just something thrown together, complete with a parlor, a kitchen area, and two bedrooms. If this was the place where Ben was going to settle down, he wanted a real home, something to make his future wife happy.

Of course, he still had to propose. But after everything she had done for him, Ben couldn't imagine that Lydia would say no. He'd already asked Mr. Cobble's permission, and he had answered with a resounding yes. Now that the home was complete, Ben and Lydia could become officially engaged.

Most of Ben's buddies had already left—Calvin and Jackson to spend time with their wives, Solomon and Ellis to work they had to do at the hotel—but Josiah still remained. "It looks fantastic," Josiah said.

"It does," Ben agreed. "But I couldn't have done it without you. I owe you fellas big time."

"Yes you do," Josiah said. "And I plan on cashing that in some day."

Ben laughed. "Absolutely. And when the time comes, I'll help you build a home for your future bride."

Josiah grunted. "That's not going to happen any time soon."

"C'mon. A strapping guy like you? You're bound to find a lady soon enough."

Josiah stuck out his chest. "I might be strapping, but have you seen the number of ladies in this town? There aren't many to choose from."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "True. But there are a few single ladies here. You're telling me not one of them is interested in you?"

"Well, believe it or not, once upon a time I was rather fixated with Betty. But back then she was too interested in flirting, had no interest in settling down. It took Jackson to break her."

“And anyone else?” Ben asked.

“I’d give Samantha a chance,” Josiah said.

Ben pictured Solomon and Ellis’s sister, with her dark chestnut hair and cheeks that were always pink, as if she brushed them with rose petals each morning. “She’s very pretty and very sweet.”

“Ya, except Solomon and Ellis won’t let me near her,” Josiah grumbled.

“And why is that?” Ben asked.

“They think I’m trouble,” Josiah said.

“Trouble? Not you!” Ben said.

Josiah slapped Ben on the back. “I like that you think that,” he said with a chuckle. But there was something in his voice, something that told Ben that he had his own secrets he didn’t care to share. But Ben wouldn’t press. He understood what it was like to have a past that you worried no one would understand.

“Well, more and more people are coming,” Ben said. “Maybe one day soon someone will arrive with a pretty daughter for you.”

“Maybe,” Josiah said, but he didn’t sound too hopeful.

The two friends chatted a few minutes more, then Josiah said goodbye. Ben thanked him again for all his help.

Ben walked through the home, inspecting it one last time. There were two small bedrooms, just right for him and Lydia with enough room for children. He made the kitchen big, with plenty of shelves, and enough space for a big table. The parlor was good-sized, and Ben pictured the room with a nice rug, children playing with wooden toys on the floor. A large window gave a lovely view of the land. Except for a bedframe, the home was devoid of furniture, but that would come in time. Everything else was perfect. Lydia was sure to love it.

Now all he had to do was show it to her.



"You want me to put on a blindfold?" Lydia held up the scrap of material Ben had gotten from the Devereux's dry goods and clothing store, her lips turning down in a frown. She glanced at her parents, who were nodding at her.

"Go on," Father said.

"I'm not sure why you want me to do this, but alright." Lydia held the material to her face, and Mrs. Cobble helped tie it behind her head.

"Make sure it's tight," Ben said. "We have a little ride we're going on."

"A ride?" Lydia said.

"Yep," Ben said.

"It's tight," Mrs. Cobble said.

"Perfect. Now I'm going to help you up onto Bullet."

"Where are we going?" Lydia asked.

"You'll see." Excitement and nerves ripped through Ben's body. He wanted to surprise Lydia; he couldn't wait to see the expression on her face when he lowered the cloth and she saw the home that he'd built for them. But at the same time, a teensy bit of worry nipped at his mind. What if she changed her mind about marrying him? What if she decided she'd rather not spend the rest of her life with him after all? But Ben told himself not to be ridiculous, that it was normal for any man to be nervous before he proposed. Of course Lydia would be excited about the home, and of course she would accept his proposal.

They loved each other, after all.

Ben helped hoist Lydia onto Bullet, then hopped on himself. "Hold on tight," Ben said. Lydia wrapped her arms around his chest, pulling her body close to his. With a wave to Mr. and Mrs. Cobble, Ben squeezed Bullet with his legs. "Let's go, boy."

Ben took Bullet slower than normal, not wanting the blindfold to fall from Lydia. She interrogated him the entire time—a picnic in the woods? a surprise party with their friends? a special piece of furniture he had made for the cafe?—but none of her guesses came close. Ben answered with a casual *nope* to each of her questions, but his mind was working on overdrive. He'd played out the scene in his mind a million times—removing Lydia's blindfold, getting down on one knee—but he hadn't decided what he would say. He had one shot, one chance to make this memorable for Lydia, and he didn't want to let her down.

The house came into view. This was it, the moment he had been waiting for. The moment that only a few short months ago, he never dreamed would be able to happen. How much everything could change in the twinkling of an eye. And it was all because of Lydia. Oh, sweet Lydia, who had given him a reason to hope, a reason to live. He owed everything to her, his whole life. And if she would have him, he would spend the rest of his life showing her how grateful he was.

Ben hopped off of Bullet, then helped Lydia dismount. With one arm around her waist and one hand holding hers, Ben carefully led Lydia to a spot right in front of the home. A ribbon of anticipation twirled inside Ben's stomach as he untied the knot of Lydia's blindfold, his hands shaky.

"Ready?" Ben asked.

"I'm not sure," Lydia said with a giggle.

Ben pulled off the blindfold. Lydia let out a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth. Moisture filled her eyes, and Ben knew that he had done it: he had made her happy.

"So this is what you've been doing!" Lydia exclaimed. "Oh Ben! I don't know what to say."

Ben lowered himself to one knee, taking both of Lydia's small hands in his own. They fit perfectly, as if they were made for each other. It had been a long, arduous journey to get to where he was. But now, looking back, Ben could say that every minute of it had been worth it. Every glance cast in search of Walter and Moses, every lonely and sleepless night on the run. All of it, all of the pain, was worth it if Lydia was his prize at the end. Ben hadn't known what he was going to say, but right then, with Lydia gazing down at him with those dark, beautiful eyes, all the right words came tumbling out.

"Lydia Cobble. You have given me my life back. I have loved you from the moment we met, and I want to spend the rest of my life proving it to you. Oh Lydia, my Lydia. Will you do me the honor of being my wife, of making me the happiest man in the world?"

Lydia squealed. She threw her arms around Ben, encircling his neck and pulling him to her. She placed a kiss on his lips, and Ben felt as if he was floating, as if the angels were carrying him, far, far away from his past. This was his new life, and with Lydia by his side, he could get through anything else that life threw in his way.

“Should I take that as a yes?” Ben said, laughing.  
“Yes!” Lydia said. “A million times yes!”



\* \* \*

Read on for a sneak peek of [A LOVE WORTH CHANGING FOR!](#)



\* \* \*

Want to know how Sarah and Calvin fell in love?

*A Love Worth Fighting For* is Sarah and Calvin’s story, the introductory novel to the *Go West Young Hearts* series. This full-length novel is available for FREE to subscribers of Janelle’s newsletter.

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\* \* \*

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# Sneak Peek! A Love Worth Changing For Chapter 1

Josiah Dillon drummed his fingers against the counter while Mrs. Boyle contemplated whether she ought to splurge on an extra few oranges. These were the moments that reminded him what a waste it was having to work in Mr. Turner's general store. Instead of being out in his claim, Josiah was stuck inside helping a middle-aged woman decide if she should buy a few pieces of fruit. His friends back in Texas would be laughing at him if they knew this was what his life had become.

But only a few more weeks of servitude, and Josiah would be free. Free to spend full time in his claim, free to strike it rich with the gold he was sure was there. The day of his freedom couldn't come fast enough.

"Oh, I don't know what to do," Mrs. Boyle moaned. "Charles is always so tight with money."

"Aren't oranges his favorite?" Josiah said.

"Yes. Those and raspberries, but we haven't seen a raspberry pass through Coyote Pass once."

"So oranges are his favorite, and we don't get them very often." Josiah stroked his chin. "I think Mr. Boyle would be pleased that his wife wanted to make him happy by getting him something she knows he enjoys."

"That's a great way to look at it," Mrs. Boyle said. "By golly, you're a treasure, Josiah. I hope Mr. Turner knows how lucky he is to have you."

Josiah pasted on a smile. If Mrs. Boyle knew his full story, she wouldn't think Josiah was such a treasure. Or that Mr. Turner was so lucky. "I'm sure he does," Josiah said, trying not to cough on his words.

Mrs. Boyle paid for her items and left. Josiah pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at the time. One hour to go.

"You did great with Mrs. Boyle."

Josiah turned to find Mr. Turner on the other side of the

counter, watching as a few customers perused the goods. He was a generation older than Josiah, his hair a full gray, his eyes kind and observant. He was ever the optimist, ever seeing the good in people even when there was none to be found.

Like in Josiah.

"You're a natural salesman, Josiah," Mr. Turner continued. "You got Mrs. Boyle to buy more oranges, and she left here thinking you did her a favor by showing her how she could make her husband happy. Well done."

A shrug rolled over Josiah's shoulders. "Just doing my job."

"You should consider starting some kind of shop of your own when your time is done here. Not a general store, of course. At least not in this town. I don't need you stealing my customers!" Mr. Turner cackled, his thin belly shaking as he did.

"No need to worry about that." Josiah had no desire to open a general store, or any store for that matter. Too much work. Mr. Turner was always up before dawn, setting out new goods that had arrived, making sure the store was clean and ready for his customers, figuring out what new stock needed to be obtained the next time the merchant passed through town. His evenings were spent balancing his books, checking his records of who still owed him what. Not the type of life that Josiah wanted.

Josiah had already found more gold in his claim than anyone he knew. A little more time there, and Josiah would be set for life. No more working, no more worrying about money or what he would eat. There was a big nugget waiting for him, calling his name. Josiah could feel it in his bones every time he was in his claim. All he had to do was find it.

"You're welcome to stay on here when your time with me is up," Mr. Turner said. "I want you to know that. You'll always have a place with me." Mr. Turner smiled at Josiah, the way a loving father might smile down at his young son. Josiah's own father had never looked at him in such a way so he couldn't be sure, but he imagined it must be so. Guilt squeezed Josiah's heart. As much as he wanted to free himself from Mr. Turner, he couldn't help but feel a teensy bit remorseful that he hadn't turned out exactly how Mr. Turner had envisioned.

But that was Mr. Turner's own fault, Josiah reminded himself. It wasn't his idea to come out West all this way. It wasn't his idea to have him work in the general store. No, it was all Mr. Turner's

doing that he'd decided to make Josiah his project. Josiah would have served his time like anyone else in his situation. It was Mr. Turner who wanted it this way.

"I'll keep that in mind," Josiah said.

"Good." Mr. Turner straightened a stack of canned beans that sat on the counter, then left to help one of the customers.

Josiah pulled out his pocket watch again. Fifty minutes to go. Josiah blew out his cheeks. Time whizzed by when he worked in his claim but dragged when he was in the store.

The front door opened and closed, and in stepped two of Josiah's buddies, brothers Solomon and Ellis Waterman. They made their way over to the counter and greeted Josiah.

"Wait 'til you see the girl who checked into the hotel earlier today," Solomon said.

Josiah raised his eyebrows, his curiosity immediately piqued. In a gold rush town dominated by men, the arrival of any woman was good news. "Tell me about her."

"Fire-red hair," Ellis said. "Green eyes that look like they could shoot daggers."

"She came in—no, stomped in—carrying nothing but a small bag and a huge rifle," Solomon added.

"She's small, but she looks like she'd beat up any man who tried to cross her."

Josiah's lips faded into a frown. A woman with red hair carrying a rifle who looked like she could whip a man in a fistfight? Not the type of woman Josiah pictured himself with. His future wife would be ladylike, preferably blonde (though brunette was fine too; he wasn't *that* picky), someone sweet and demure. "And why would I want to meet this girl?"

"I thought anything female was worth meeting to you," Solomon said.

"Ha!" Josiah wove his arms across his chest. "I do have a few standards."

"You never know. Maybe this gal's the one for you!" Ellis said. He and Solomon snickered.

"Very funny fellas," Josiah said. "You had my hopes up for a moment."

"She is beautiful, though," Ellis said. "In a wild, crazy way, but still beautiful."

"I think I'll pass," Josiah said. "I prefer to not be beaten up by

the woman I'm courting."

Josiah turned to help a customer ready to make a payment. Only a little while longer, he told himself. A little while longer and he'd find his gold and be set for life. And what woman wouldn't want a rich man? He'd be able to have the pick of his choice then.

He only had to wait a little longer.



\* \* \*

After his shift, Josiah headed down Main Street to Golden Palace Saloon. There were more saloons than any other type of establishment in Coyote Pass, but Josiah always found himself at Golden Palace. He'd tried a few of the other places, but every time he returned to Golden Palace. Sure, the other saloons might have had a better honky tonk piano man or better drinks, but they didn't have the same environment, the same feel.

And they didn't have Theo.

Josiah high-fived a few of his buddies as he passed the faro tables, weaving his way through the already crowded room. It didn't matter what time of day Josiah arrived, Golden Palace was always packed, filled with prospectors hoping they'd find better luck in the saloons than they had in the river or mines. Josiah worked his way over to the three-card brag table, nearly colliding with a drunk man who stepped back directly into Josiah's path.

"Watch it!" the man snarled, his rank breath making Josiah's face pucker. The man puffed out his chest, his arm preparing to take a shot at Josiah.

The inebriated man would be no match for Josiah, but Josiah wasn't in the mood for a fight. He had money to win. "Sorry. No harm done," Josiah said, squeezing past the man.

"Josiah! Good to see you!" Theo greeted as Josiah arrived at his table. He extended his hand to Josiah to shake.

Josiah took Theo's hand, slipping a small nugget into it. "Good to see you, too."

Five men were already seated at the table, all rugged and dirty. Josiah had played with them before, prospectors who lived in tents in the mining camp on the outskirts of town. They wouldn't be much competition. Josiah hopped onto a barrel used as a stool. "Mind if I join you fellas?"

"If you must," one of the men—Alan, Josiah remembered—grumbled.

Josiah played a few rounds, memorizing the cards that had been played. He went out early once, purposefully lost twice. Theo winked at Josiah. This was his round.

"I'm playing blind again," Josiah said. Theo stretched his neck as he dealt, signaling to Josiah that he was getting a flush. Nothing too high that would make the others suspicious, but high enough that Josiah would win. The other men made their wages. Josiah waited a few rounds, then upped the ante, filling the pot with coins.

The other men went out, but Alan was still in. He wasn't playing blind, so he knew what he had. He stared at his cards, stone faced. He probably had something decent, like a pair, something that he figured could beat a player who wasn't looking at his cards. Theo was a genius like that.

"I'm in." Alan tossed in his coins, then flipped over his cards. As Josiah guessed, he indeed had a pair. Two queens and an ace. A smug smile broke out across his face. "Let's see what you got, Josiah."

Josiah kept his face serious, revealing nothing. He'd learned how to when he was a boy from watching his father, watching him swipe items in a store without so much as a blink. One by one, Josiah flipped over his cards. A seven, a two, a jack. All hearts. Josiah allowed a smile this time, feigning surprise. "I do believe I won!"

Alan pounded his fist on the table while the other men snickered. "He got you good," one of the men said.

"Lucky break," Alan grumbled, narrowing his eyes.

"Calm down, Alan," Theo said. "There's still plenty of time to make up for it."

"That's right," Josiah said, slapping Alan on the back. "Plenty of time." But Josiah knew that he was the only one at the table going

home with more gold than he'd brought.

# Sneak Peek! A Love Worth Changing For Chapter 2

Scarlett Chastain hung up the couple dresses she had brought with her, then plopped down onto the thinly stuffed mattress. The room at the Waterman Hotel was tiny, nothing more than a bed and a small dresser, but it would suffice. Despite its minimal offerings, the hotel was still far better than many of the others that she'd stayed in as she'd crisscrossed the country on her way out West. Her body was weary from her travels, but the sun was still up. Being someone who needed to keep herself occupied, Scarlett soon grew bored. She hopped out of bed, grabbed her rifle, and set off down Main Street.

The stench of outhouses and horse dung accosted Scarlett's nose as she made her way down the busy street, nothing more than a strip of dirt with ramshackle buildings that looked as though they were thrown up in haste. The streets were littered with trash—cans, old shoes, rags, papers, even a broken saddle—and discarded beer bottles lay in front of the saloons. She passed a dry goods and clothing store, a gunsmith, a blacksmith shop, an abandoned building with a broken window. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that every gold rush town she had stayed in didn't have.

A group of men loitering in front of a saloon whistled as Scarlett neared. They were all dressed in flannel shirts, all in need of a good scrub. "Well looky here," one of them said. "A red."

Another of the men approached Scarlett, tipping his hat. "Afternoon, m'lady." He reached for Scarlett's hand, but she slapped it away.

"Hands to yourself," Scarlett snapped.

"Easy there," the man said. "I mean no harm. You can't blame a man for wanting to meet a beauty like yourself, can you?"

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. She knew that men outnumbered the women by ridiculous amounts out West, knew that they would be unrelenting in their flirtations and pursuits of any woman who happened to pass by. But Scarlett hadn't come to town in search of a husband. She was there for the same reason they were: to strike it



rich.

“Out of my way.” Scarlett held her head up as high as her neck would stretch. She was tiny, barely five feet, and no physical match for any of the men. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t hold her own, couldn’t give off the air of someone who shouldn’t be messed with.

Scarlett continued down Main Street, looking for something to do. The town didn’t offer much in the way of entertainment other than the saloons. Scarlett came to one called Golden Palace. She liked the sound of that: Golden Palace. One day she would live in a golden palace and never have to worry about money again. Shouts and laughter floated outside, along with the clatter of an out-of-tune piano. Her kind of place.

Heads swiveled as Scarlett stepped through the batwing doors. Scarlett’s eyes darted around the room, taking it in. The front of the saloon was packed with tables of men playing faro and three-card brag as they puffed on cigars and cigarettes. The back of the saloon held tables of men drinking and carousing, fancy ladies with dresses cut higher than she’d ever seen refilling their drinks. The stares of the men burned into Scarlett’s skin, and she knew they were watching her every move. Scarlett noticed a table of three-card brag with an empty seat, and she made her way over to it, pushing past the men who tried to step in her path.

One of the men snickered as Scarlett sat. “This table’s for serious gamblers only.”

Scarlett adjusted her rifle on her back. “What makes you think I’m not?”

Another of the men elbowed his friend. “Let her play, Rudy.”

The dealer shuffled the deck. “It’s good timing. We just had a prial.”

“Perfect.” Scarlett eyed the dealer carefully as he shuffled the cards. There had been too many times that she’d ended up at the table of a shady dealer, in cahoots with one of the gamblers, sending secret signals on when to bet. A stretch of the neck, a wink of the eye, a tap with a finger. Scarlett wasn’t about to have a fast one pulled on her.

Scarlett played a few rounds, winning more than she lost. She was good, better than she was sure that they expected her to be. The dealer dealt another round. Just as Scarlett was about to place her first bet, a booming voice caught her attention.

“Listen up!”

Scarlett's head whipped sideways toward the sound. A man stood in the middle of the room, towering above even the tallest men. He wore a buckskin coat dripping in fringe, beaded gloves, and leather boots up to his thigh. A rifle lay across his shoulders, and he gripped it with each hand. The piano man stopped playing, and the saloon quieted, the only sound hushed whispers as they waited for what the man had to say.

"I'm Gunslinger Jim," the man said, his voice deep and authoritative. "The best shooter there is. I've got one hundred dollars for any man who can beat me in a shooting competition. That's right: one hundred dollars! You lose, though, and you owe me fifty."

Scarlett gasped. Gunslinger Jim, there in person! He was the talk of the towns as Scarlett had made her way across the West. The surest shot there was, people said. Someone worth paying to see, that's how good he was, people said.

The buzz of men discussing the offer filled the room. *You could do it, Rudy. Go for it, Milton! Frank, you've got a sure shot.* Their conversations floated around Scarlett, but she paid no attention. Her own mind was racing. She pulled her rifle around to the front of her, ran her hands down the barrel. One hundred dollars was a lot of money. If there was one thing Scarlett was good at, it was shooting. Out of necessity, Scarlett had been shooting since the age of six. She didn't miss. But Scarlett had never competed before, never had the pressure of people watching.

One hundred dollars might be a lot of money, but so was losing fifty.

Scarlett squeezed the rifle. She had big dreams when it came to shooting. One hundred dollars would be a good start to making that dream a reality. Plus, if she won this competition, everyone in town would know her name. Everyone in town would know that she could shoot, that she didn't miss. But if she lost... she would be known for losing. A laughingstock, the girl who thought she could beat Gunslinger Jim.

And who would ever one day pay to see the girl who lost to Gunslinger Jim?

Gunslinger Jim, the best shooter there was. Did Scarlett really think she had a chance?

A man at a nearby table jumped onto his chair, holding a rifle above his head. "I'm in!"

Gunslinger Jim's eyes traveled up and down the man's body. A sneer spread across his lips. "You? This should be easy." His shoulders shook as a deep laugh bellowed from him. "Very well. Men, place your wagers."

The saloon erupted in people placing bets, arguing over who would win. Some said the man—Frank Lloyd, Scarlett learned—had learned to shoot before he could walk; he was sure to be able to take on Gunslinger. Others insisted that Gunslinger Jim never lost. Scarlett sat clutching her rifle, a lump filling her throat. This was her chance. Her chance to make money, her chance to make a name for herself.

Scarlett hopped onto the table, sending cards and coins flying. She put her fingers to her lips and let out a shrill whistle. Silence descended upon the room. All eyes were on her, heads cocked in confusion at the tiny redhead. Her stomach knotted; her pulse staggered. But she kept her face stern, free of any sign of the nerves that swirled within her.

"I'm in too," she said.

# Sneak Peek! A Love Worth Changing For Chapter 3

Josiah's jaw fell. There was a woman on a table, swinging her rifle, ready to take on Gunslinger Jim. Josiah had never seen anything like her before, didn't know it was possible for someone so petite to look so fierce. Her eyes blazed, as if they might shoot daggers if double crossed, her face as serious as a man's. And yet... she was beautiful, too. Her long, red hair cascaded down her back like a molten waterfall, not done up in a bun or tucked under a bonnet like most women. Her nose was dainty, her lips as pink as a rose's first bloom. Despite her stern look, her features were delicate, as if there was a softness hidden behind her tough exterior—if only one took the time to find it. She was a conundrum, two types of women rolled into one.

Solomon elbowed Josiah. "That's her. That's the girl we were telling you about."

"That's the girl who just checked into your hotel?"

Solomon nodded. "That's her."

Josiah's eyes grew round as he watched the young woman insist she could take on Gunslinger Jim. The very Gunslinger Jim. Even back in Texas, Josiah had heard of Gunslinger Jim. No one had beaten Gunslinger Jim. Ever.

The fringe on Gunslinger Jim's coat swayed as he laughed at the young woman. "Now look, lady. Normally I never pass on a chance to make an extra fifty bucks. But I'm not gonna let a perdy lady like yourself go broke." Gunslinger glanced around the room. "Any other takers?"

The young woman stomped on the table, the wood cracking under the weight of her boot. Her brow furrowed; her lids hardened. "I said I was in."

Ellis snickered. "Can you believe it? This woman actually thinks she can take on Gunslinger Jim."

Josiah didn't answer, watching closely as the scene unfolded. The woman had a spark to her that he'd never seen before, a

determination as fierce as any man's. If ever anyone was to beat Gunslinger Jim, that was the attitude it would take.

"I'm going to tell you one more time, sweetie. I don't lose," Gunslinger Jim said.

"You won't be able to say that after today."

A collective *Oooh* filled the room as men burst out laughing. Ellis laughed so hard that he wiped a tear from his eye. But Josiah didn't see anything funny. This woman was the real deal; he could feel it in his bones.

And if he bet on her and she *did* win: oh the money he would make! Josiah rubbed his hands together. Gunslinger Jim had never lost. But no one stayed on top forever.

"Frank is good," Solomon said. "I've seen him. Shot a quail two seconds after he flew up. Bam, just like that."

"But this is Gunslinger Jim we're talking about," Ellis said. "Frank's not going to win, no matter how good he is."

Solomon and Ellis argued back and forth, finally settling on Gunslinger Jim. "C'mon. Let's go place our wages," Solomon said, standing. "You goin' with Gunslinger?"

Josiah swung his head in a no.

"Frank?" Ellis asked. "He's good, but hear me now: he's not beating Gunslinger."

Josiah swung his head no again.

Solomon and Ellis exchanged glances. "Then who are you going with?"

The right corner of Josiah's lips pulled up into a crooked smile. "I'm betting on the girl."

# Sneak Peek! A Love Worth Changing For Chapter 4

Scarlett marched down the street, squeezing the barrel of her rifle so tight that her knuckles turned pink. Only one man had placed a wager on her winning, she'd been told. A room full of people, and only one had any faith that she could do it. Either that, or he thought he'd take a chance on making it big on the thin possibility that she might pull it off.

Oh, she'd pull it off. Scarlett pursed her lips, scrunched her forehead. She thought of the first time she'd held a rifle, an old Kentucky long rifle, that her parents had hidden in their closet. They were Quakers, and Quakers didn't use guns, but they'd kept it hidden away in case of an emergency. Scarlett was all of six years old that first time she took the weapon, that first time she'd held the shiny metal in her hands, in awe of the power it possessed. Her father had just died, her family was hungry, and Scarlett was determined to find food for them. And so she did, every day. She taught herself to shoot, taught herself to hit even the most challenging of targets, taught herself to never miss.

No one believed in her, but that was because they didn't know her, Scarlett told herself. She'd show them. She'd show them she could take on Frank or Gunslinger Jim or anyone else they threw her way. Scarlett gulped, her throat a ball of sawdust. At least, she hoped she'd show them.

Scarlett followed the crowd from the saloon down Main Street. They passed another hotel, more saloons, a cafe, a general store. The main portion of the street ended, and the crowd continued down a dirt path. A small church stood in the distance, and Scarlett was relieved to know there was at least a little Christian civility in the town. The path forked, ending at a colorful meadow full of blue flowering summer lupine, sulphur buckwheat, scarlet gilia, and corn lilies. Three deer fled as the crowd arrived. Up above, two hawks soared.

Gunslinger Jim's assistant was already at the meadow, where

he'd set up a few dozen pigeon traps about twenty-five to thirty yards away. On the shooter's call, Gunslinger Jim explained, the assistant would pull a long cord and release the bird. Each shooter had one shot to get the bird. If they missed, they were out. Last man—or woman, Gunslinger Jim added with a chuckle—standing won.

"I hope you two are ready to pay up," Gunslinger Jim said, the fringe of his coat swinging as he laughed.

"You haven't won yet," Scarlett said.

Gunslinger Jim adjusted his hat. "Feisty little thing, aren't you? I like that."

Scarlett pursed her lips. She'd show them.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get started." Gunslinger Jim motioned with his hand, and the crowd from the saloon fanned out, forming a half-circle around the three competitors. Gunslinger Jim bowed slightly toward Scarlett. "Ladies first."

Scarlett's throat lurched with a hard swallow. She took a step forward, determined to not let her nerves show. Behind her, the men from the saloon chuckled. Bet she's out in the first round. Bet she couldn't shoot a pigeon if it was sitting in a tree five feet in front of her. Who does she think she is, taking on Gunslinger? Scarlett clamped her teeth tight. Their words were like accelerant to the fire within her. She stood at stance and prepared her rifle, her finger ready to press the trigger once the pigeon was in sight.

"Pull!" Scarlett shouted.

The pigeon catapulted from the trap, frenzied and crazed as it zigzagged its way toward the sky. Scarlett knew she only had a matter of seconds. She steadied her breathing, reminding herself she'd done this a million times. This wasn't any different from any other time she'd gone shooting. She waited until the pigeon was lined up in the rifle's scope, then fired. Crack! A hush grew over the crowd as the boom from the rifle echoed across the open meadow. The pigeon's flight stopped in an instant, and it fell to the earth.

A collective gasp left the crowd. Then they erupted in applause, waving their fists in the air as they cheered. Scarlett turned, taking it in. But one shot meant nothing unless she won. She lowered her eyebrows, envisioning her next shot.

"Impressive," Gunslinger Jim said. "Better than I expected."

"I have a lot more to offer than what people expect," Scarlett said.

It was Frank's turn next. He readied himself and called for the

pull. His pigeon flew up in a straight line, not nearly as difficult as Scarlett's had been. Bam! The pigeon fell from the sky. Then Gunslinger took a turn. His rifle crackled with authority, as if it knew it was the best around.

The three of them continued on, round after round. Ten rounds passed, then fifteen. With each shot that she took, Scarlett's confidence grew. She was holding her own, holding her ground with the men. The crowd wasn't whispering their doubts about her anymore. A beauty with a gun; who woulda thunk it? She's almost as good as Gunslinger Jim. Heck, I'd pay to watch her. But Scarlett couldn't let their praise get to her any more than their skepticism. If she was going to win, she had to stay focused, stay sharp.

The assistant released the sixteenth pigeon from its trap. It zigzagged all over, as if its brain had been scrambled before its release. Scarlett kept her finger ready, waiting for the precise moment her rifle aligned with the bird. She would have half a second when the time arrived. If she shot too soon, she'd be out. Too late, the bird would be out of range. Gunslinger Jim snickered. Then the pigeon lined up, and Scarlett squeezed the trigger. The bird was dead.

Scarlett turned just in time to see Gunslinger Jim's jaw drop, his eyebrows raised. Frank let out a low whistle. The crowd cheered. Scarlett took a step back.

It was Frank's turn. He called for the pull, and the pigeon zoomed up. Frank aimed his weapon, but he waited too long. His rifle went off with a crack, but the pigeon was gone.

Frank was out. A small portion of the crowd groaned, booing and hissing at Frank.

"Thanks a lot, Frank!" one man called out.

"Now I'm broke, Frank!" another one shouted.

Gunslinger Jim turned to Scarlett. "Well looky here. Just me and you left."

"Not what you expected, is it?" Scarlett said. Gunslinger towered above her, but Scarlett stood with her head held up. She might not match him in size or strength, but she had guts. Or at least, she hoped to portray that she did.

"Can't say that it is."

"I didn't enter this competition to lose," Scarlett said.

The ghost of a smile crossed Gunslinger's face. He patted her on the head as if she were a child. "We'll see about that, little lady."



Gunslinger took his turn, and the two of them continued on. Twenty rounds passed, then twenty-five. More bottles of whiskey were brought from the saloon, served by the fancy girls who went around and filled up the men's tin cups. At one point, a brawl broke out between three men. The sun began its descent, the sky coloring a bright shade of pink, but still Scarlett and Gunslinger continued on.

"I hope you don't run out of pigeons," Scarlett said after her thirty-first shot.

"I must confess, you've lasted longer than anyone I've competed with," Gunslinger said. "But you'll tire eventually. And don't you worry your perdy little head. I've got more than enough pigeons."

Another five rounds passed, thirty-six pigeons unable to escape Scarlett's perfect aim. Gunslinger strode up for his thirty-sixth turn, his chest puffed out in confidence as it was every time. "Pull!" he called, and the assistant released the pigeon. It vaulted up into the sky, then veered a sudden left. Gunslinger squeezed his trigger. The crackle of his rifle echoed across the meadow. And then... nothing. The bird continued on its flight until he was far away, out of view.

Scarlett had won.

A hush covered the meadow, the only sound the coo of the pigeons still in their traps. Gunslinger removed his hat, clutching it to his chest. His shoulders sank, the pride he had carried himself with nowhere to be found. "I do declare," he said, his voice soft. "In eighteen years of doing this, I've never lost a game. Not one. And then I meet you, little lady. Well done."

Scarlett scanned the crowd, their faces a mixture of shock, amazement, and disappointment. Every one of them who bet had just lost money. Everyone except one. Scarlett wondered who the man was, the man who took a chance on her.

"Let's head back to the saloon, and I'll give you your money," Gunslinger said. "Fair is fair."

Scarlett's head spun. She'd just won a shooting contest against Gunslinger Jim. She was about to be one hundred dollars richer. A smile crawled across her face. It would take time to process this, to process everything that transpired that day, but she knew this was the beginning of her life turning around. This was the beginning of things going her way. For her whole life, the only thing she had known was poverty and heartbreak. But not any more. She was determined: not any more.

Scarlett followed Gunslinger Jim back to the saloon. The crowd traipsed behind them, not as eager as when they set out. Pieces of their conversations floated up to Scarlett. They were talking about her, talking about the little redhead who shot a rifle better than any man. Coming from a small town, she was used to everyone knowing her name. But back in Ohio, she was known for other things, always with a shake of the head and eyes full of pity. The little girl from a family who already had too many children. The little girl who wasted her time shooting all day instead of learning. The young woman with no parents at all. The young woman left at the altar, too wild to capture any man's heart.

Well, in Coyote Pass no one would pity her now. They knew her name, and the only information about her that they needed to know: that she was strong, capable, and able to hold her ground against any man.

Gunslinger, Scarlett, and the rest of the crowd filed back into Golden Palace Saloon. Many of the men resumed their drinking, and the piano man started his off-key tunes once more. But others stood around Scarlett and Gunslinger, watching. Scarlett wondered again who the man was who took a risk on her.

Gunslinger reached into his pocket. "I always carry these with me, but I never expected to actually have to pay them." Gunslinger pulled out his hand and held open his palm, revealing five gold coins. "Five twenty dollar double eagles. They're yours."

Scarlett retrieved the coins from Gunslinger and examined them closely. She'd heard of the double eagle coins, but she'd never seen them in person. On one side of the coin was the head of a lady, with stars around the circumference. The other side of the coin had the eagle design in the middle with the words "United States of America Twenty D" around the edges. Sure Scarlett had made money from gambling as she made her way out West, but she'd never had anything like this before.

Scarlett dropped the coins into the small bag she carried and pointed her rifle around the room. All those money-hungry men, and they all knew she had money. "Alright, boys. None of you try to rob me, or I'll shoot. And you know I won't miss."



\* \* \*

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# About the Author



Janelle Adams is an author of historical Western romance—always

clean, always sweet, and always happily ever after. She writes stories of strong women and swoon-worthy men as they bravely forge new lives out West... and fall in love, of course.

Janelle was born and raised in sunny Southern California, but her heart belongs on a ranch in Montana or the mountains of Colorado.

Since elementary school, Janelle has loved to write. She spent her earliest years writing stories that her classmates enjoyed reading. In eighth grade, she wrote her first “novel,” one-hundred handwritten pages in a spiral-bound notebook. That story didn’t go on to win any awards, but it did set Janelle up for a lifetime of writing.

Janelle is happily married and the mother of two boys who keep her busy.

Janelle invites you to receive a copy of her free, full-length novel *A Love Worth Fighting For*, the introductory story to the *Go West Young Hearts* series by [clicking here](#).

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